



Visage of Lost Love by phieillydinyia

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Summary: "EL!" Mike yelled, before he ran into the cloud of blackness. He collided with something solid and shoved her hard, pushing her out and away from the internal darkness that now surrounded him... Season 1 ending AU. In the final battle against the Demogorgon, Mike saves El and he is taken to the Upside Down instead. Despite the terrifying things she may face, El has to get him back.

1. Chapter 1

Hey, everyone who decided to read this!

Okay so this is my first attempt at fan fiction so I apologize if it's not perfect. If u do read it, plz leave a review so I know what your thoughts are. I'm not sure how many chapters will be in this, but probably more than one. And no, I don't own Stranger Things. Thank u for reading and hope u enjoy!

Mike stared, horrified, as El stood in front of the Demogorgon, but her brown eyes were locked on him, full of pain, but also determination. Blood leaked from her ears and nose. Her face flickered in and out of sight, in sync with the lights of the classroom. He knew what she was about to do, but what she said next confirmed it.

"Goodbye, Mike."

His vision blurred slightly with tears, and his heart was in his mouth. His back was heavy against the cupboard he was leaning on. He felt frozen. Mike suspected she was using her mind to hold him there.

A moment later, her face was turned away from him. The Demogorgon screeched at her, but El stood unflinching and unafraid. Mike heard her utter the words "no more" before raising her hand out towards it.

El started to shake with the effort. She let out a high-pitched scream, causing all three boys to cover their ears. The room vibrated at the amount of energy El was using to kill this monster once and for all. The Demogorgon began to disintegrate, black debris peeling away from it and starting to conceal El from view.

Mike leaned forward, wanting desperately to save the girl he loved from destroying herself to protect them. He couldn't let her die, he couldn't- he gasped, realisation suddenly hitting him. El was using all her powers on the monster; he was no longer immobilised. He could move!

Without a second thought, Mike shot up from his position on the floor and ran towards the screaming girl. He barely registered the shocked and surprised shouts of "Mike!" from Lucas and Dustin.

"EL!" Mike yelled, before he ran into the cloud of blackness. He collided with something solid and shoved her hard, pushing her out and away from the internal darkness that now surrounded him. He tried to follow her out, find his way through the suffocating obscurity. But he found himself losing all his senses, before his mind also faded to empty black.

El gasped as she landed hard against the classroom floor, knocking into a nearby chair. Straight away, she turned around and her eyes searched for him. All that remained were a few drifting black ashes, and a large crack in the board where the monster had stood moments ago. The Demogorgon was gone. And so was Mike.

For a moment, there was utter silence.

The boys stood frozen in the same positions they'd been in before, hardly daring to breathe as the truth of the pandemonium of what had just happened slowly dawned on them.

"M-Mike?" the girl whimpered, mostly to herself. She was exhausted from all the energy she had used to kill the monster, but that was the last thing on her mind right now. She refused to believe it. He couldn't be gone, not Mike. It was supposed to be *her* who disappeared. She was meant to keep them all safe, especially him. She'd failed. He'd saved her life, and now he'd been the one to pay the price. The boy who had taught her so many wonderful and beautiful new things, who had somehow found a way into her heart in a way El did not know how to explain, had been taken away from her.

Dustin was the first to react, breaking free of his paralysis. "El?" he called, before rushing across the classroom and kneeling beside El on the floor. Lucas was quick to join him. "Are you okay?"

El's horrified eyes stayed frozen on the spot Mike and the Demogorgon had vanished. She didn't answer Dustin's question.

"Mike," she repeated, fresh tears leaking down her face. She didn't think she'd ever felt this amount of pain before in her life. The only thing stopping sorrow from overwhelming her were Dustin's steady hands on each of her shoulders. "Where is he, where did he go?" El demanded frantically, as if Dustin or Lucas might know the answer.

Lucas looked back over his shoulder, his breath catching in his throat. "We'll find him, El, don't worry," he told her, giving the panicked El the best reassuring smile he could muster, although inside he was terrified Mike was gone for good.

Dustin started to come up with his own consoling comment, before all three of their heads snapped round at the sound of men shouting at each other in the distance, at another side of the Hawkins Middle School.

"Crap, the Bad Men are still here," Dustin muttered, using the only name he knew to refer to the evil people that were responsible for this hell they had faced. The people responsible for taking El's childhood away, and now for the disappearance of his friend. He looked back at El, gasping. "Crap, they're looking for El! We have to go, right now!"

With the help of Lucas, he quickly grabbed El's arms pulled her to her feet. She stumbled slightly. "Can you walk?" Dustin asked urgently, ready to run carrying her if had to.

El nodded at him. Dustin and Lucas started to pull her towards the door, but she stopped them, turning around once again. "But Mike-?"

"We'll get him later," Dustin insisted, alarm bells going off in his head as he heard the men's voices getting closer and louder. He needed to get El out of here quickly or she stood no chance.

"Promise?"

"We promise!" Lucas insisted. Upon hearing that, El finally let them lead her out of the classroom. She wanted to resist and pull away, but deep down she knew Mike was no longer in that room. She didn't know where he was, or if he was even alive, and that frightened her. She realized she was more scared than she'd ever been in her life.

Facing the Demogorgon had been nothing compared to this.

El stayed trapped in her terrifying thoughts, not aware of the twists and turns Dustin and Lucas were making with her along the school corridor to find the nearest exit.

El vowed right then that she'd do whatever it takes to find him. She wouldn't let him down, just like he hadn't let her down.

She would find him.

She promised.

Mike's eyes shot open and he gasped, spitting out a vile substance, breathing heavily.

After a few seconds, his head stopped spinning and he took in his surroundings. He had never felt such familiarity and such strangeness at the same time. He knew he was still in the classroom, lying in the exact place he had been before. He didn't know how long it had been; seconds, minutes, maybe even hours. He was lying on his back on a cold, damp, slimy surface.

The classroom didn't look the same though, that he knew. There were thick, slimy vines intertwining around all the furniture, the walls and the floor. Everything looked rotten and decomposed. The air was somehow a grey-blue colour and small fragments floated around the gloomy atmosphere.

Then there was the sound. It sounded eerie and inhumane, a soft, haunting humming, nothing Mike had ever heard before.

The boy instantly knew where he was. They'd talked about this enough, they knew this was where the Demogorgon came from. He was certain this was the upside down.

Groaning, Mike sat up from his position on the floor, heart beating fast. He slowly stood up, leaning on a decaying table. He held his clammy hands in tight fists, shaking from a mixture of cold and fear.

He looked around, searching for any sign of human life. "El?" he

croaked, uncertainly. Mike cleared his throat and called louder. "EL?"

He started to move himself towards the door frame in a haze, stumbling over the vines beneath his feet. "EL?" He called again, reaching the exit and looking down both sides of the dark, desolate corridor, which was also wrapped in ghostly vines. "EL? DUSTIN? LUCAS?"

No one replied, just the faint echo of his voice. Taking a deep, shaking breath, Mike made his way down the halls of the upside down version of his middle school, walking quickly, trying to find a way out.

Mike felt more afraid with each passing moment of being trapped in this place. He couldn't stop the horrifying images flashing through his mind; being stuck in here forever, never seeing his friends or family again, never seeing El again, dying alone in this dark, miserable place.

Turning a corner, Mike's hopes suddenly lifted. There at the end, was a glowing, red light. He started to run towards it, praying it was what he thought it was.

Only ten feet away from it, his face lit up with relief. It was a portal, a way for him to escape through, and get out of this terrible place.

He ran the last few steps and his hands slammed into it. He stared transfixed at the thin layer of red goo, the only thing in the way of him breaking free and getting out. Mike shoved his hand through and it broke easily enough.

But then he realized the problem, his reassured smile flickering and dying. He hadn't noticed there were bricks still surrounding most of the portal until just now, making the area to the other side small and narrow.

Mike knew he couldn't fit through it, certainly no more than his head. The real world was only inches away from him and he couldn't get to it. Angry tears sprang to his eyes, as he realized what this meant.

"No!" he yelled, shoving his arms into the remaining bricks, willing

them to crumble enough for him to get through. They stubbornly held their place, and he soon realized it was no use.

Mike pulled at the red goo to give him a clearer line of vision of the real world. "HELLO?" He shouted, hoping there were still people in the school that would hear him and help him escape, maybe even his friends. "HELLO? EL? LUCAS? DUSTIN? ANYONE?"

He grew more desperate by the minute, wanting to be out of this place. "HELLO? IS ANYONE THERE?"

Then he heard a voice. Mike hadn't heard what the person had said, because he was too busy yelling. He instantly shut up, and listened.

There were footsteps coming closer towards him. Mike tried to peer around and see who it was, but there wasn't enough room. The person, whoever they were, didn't try to say anything else.

Mike swallowed, heart hammering. "E-El, is that you?"

A few more seconds went by, where nothing happened except the incoming footsteps echoing along the floor.

And suddenly a face appeared in front of Mike's, making eye contact with him through the crater, eyes piercing.

Mike's breath caught when he realized who it was.

2. Chapter 2

Hey, everyone!

Omg, wow, I did not expect so many positive reviews, thank you all so much! No one really likes cliffhangers, so I've finished the second chapter for you. Sorry it's not as good as it could be; I am only a naive 15-year-old after all. But hope u like it anyway :)

(I still don't own Stranger Things).

Mike stared in horror as a slight smile crept along the man's face in front of him.

"Y-You!" he choked out, finally. "Y-You're dead! YOU'RE DEAD! I saw-,"

"Oh, but did you really, Mike?" Dr Martin Brenner gave a low chuckle. His cold blue eyes never left Mike's, and the reflection of the upside down illuminated in them only made him look more sinister. "Sometimes our brain shows us what we want to see, doesn't it?"

"No," Mike whispered, the word hardly audible as speech failed him, his heart racing. He wanted to run, get as far away from this man as possible, and he was on the verge of doing this, if it wasn't the fact that his limbs forbade him to move, keeping him locked in place.

This was the man who had hurt El all her life, who had stripped her of everything a normal child should have had. He had seen the way El had looked at Brenner, he knew she feared him, possibly more than anything else. Mike's rage burned through him, but panic and dread were his more dominant emotions; he knew what this man was capable of.

Brenner leaned forward, through the small gap separating the real world and the upside down, his leering smile growing. This was enough to break Mike of his frozen shock; he bolted, pushing his hands against the wall to give him extra speed, choosing the upside down over Brenner any day.

But in his rush, his foot slipped on the gooey slime. Brenner used this opportunity to cast his arm in through the void and grab hold of Mike's wrist.

Mike yelled in terror, trying to yank his arm free. But he was only a twelve-year-old boy, and Brenner had an iron grip on him.

"LET ME GO!" Mike bellowed, pure fear ripping through him as he refused to stop struggling. He couldn't look into the man's face anymore, keeping his eyes locked on the hand fastened around his wrist, pleading for it to loosen slightly and let him get away. "GET OFF ME! LET ME G-,"

Brenner jerked his arm towards himself at rapid speed, dragging Mike with him. The boy stumbled forwards and his head met the wall with a loud *crack*.

Mike blacked out and he knew no more, as he fell unconscious.

"Okay," Dustin panted, grabbing hold of the fire exit door and yanking it open. "Okay, through here, come on!"

El gave a small shiver, as the cold, night air hit her. The hand Lucas was holding pulled her forwards, deeper into the black gloom, her feet faltering slightly on the uncut grass.

Dustin followed them, looking over his shoulder as the door shut behind them. No one was in sight, the corridor they'd just come out of empty and silent. The people and the Bad Men were probably all nearer the front of the school, where most of the commotion from earlier that night (hardly ten minutes ago) had happened. That's why he had taken them in this direction.

He stared back across the field where a group of trees stood, leading into a small but secluded forest. "Let's get into the woods," he shot at Lucas as they hurriedly speeded towards it, El bundled in the middle of them. "We'll be safe, for now."

They reached the perimeter of the woodland, but continued further into it, preferring to stay well out of sight to help El's safety.

"It's okay, El, you're gonna be fine in here," Lucas muttered quietly to the silent girl, as Dustin trekked in front of them, checking for any large roots they could trip over. They could honestly do with a flashlight or two.

El let the words pass over her head. She knew Lucas meant well, and she also already knew she was safe. She trusted Lucas and Dustin with her life now. It wasn't her own safety she was concerned about, it was *his*. In fact, she could think of nothing else. Because to her, nothing else mattered.

Karen Wheeler twiddled her thumbs uncertainly in her lap as her husband drove the car into the school parking lot, which was busy and full of agitation and bustle. There were cars and ambulances everywhere, not to mention the amount of people.

Ted pulled up, and Karen hardly waited for the car to fully stop, tearing the door open and stepping out into the cool breeze. She'd heard a few terrifying things about what was happening here at the middle school and that her son should be here somewhere.

"Michael?" she hesitantly called out, Ted walking briskly right behind her. Her eyes combed through the mass of people, trying to spot her boy. "*Michael*?" Her heart quickened with each passing moment she failed to catch sight of him. She wanted to know what was going on, but no one gave her a second look, deciding to rush past her and attend to a different acquirement.

"Maybe he's still in the school?" Ted suggested, after a few minutes of scanning the entire area.

Karen was about to reply when she caught sight of a woman who looked a lot like Dustin's mother, and appeared to be in a similar position to herself, frantically calling out her son's name. Taking a deep breath, Karen hurried over to her, wrapping her coat tighter around her.

"Claudia?" Karen raised her voice. "Claudia!"

Mrs Henderson's head shot round to address the woman in front of

her. "Karen? Have you seen Dustin?"

"You can't find your son either?" Karen's shoulders stiffened. She knew something was wrong now. This was where Michael was supposed to be. This was where *all* the boys were supposed to be.

She heard raised voices not far behind her and turned around to see a couple she recognised as Mr and Mrs Sinclair, who also had looks of worry and concern etched upon their faces. Karen let out a shaky exhale, realizing what this meant. None of the boys were here. They were missing. She could only hope that, wherever they were right now, they were together.

Dustin finally stopped, sighing defiantly and resting his hands on his knees. He looked around him at the tall, darkened trees of the forest, mostly hidden in shadows, masking the presence of the three kids to anyone nearby. "This should be far enough," he informed the others, dropping his backpack to the ground.

"Wait, *what*?" Lucas stared at his friend in shocked amusement. "You want us to *stay* here? In the woods?"

Dustin glared back. "Well, yeah, we can't leave just yet, there are people everywhere looking for El right now! We need to keep her hidden from them."

"We can't just sleep here all night!" Lucas was intent on keeping up his side of the argument. "Our parents will be really worried, and there are more efficient things we could be doing, like telling Chief Hopper about all this, and finding Mike!"

El, who hadn't really been listening to their pointless bickering, snapped her head up at the sound of his name.

Dustin paused for a moment, his eyes lingering on the fearful expression on El's face which he could just about interpret in the pitch blackness. He swallowed, trying to find the right words. "Look, we're all scared, alright? But if we try and go anywhere right now, it's likely we'll run into trouble. We can't put El in danger!" The curly-haired boy triumphantly sat down in the bracken below him, making

it clear he had no intention of leaving anytime soon. "We'll figure something out tomorrow, and we're going to fin- fix all this." He was pretty sure it already was tomorrow anyway, probably two or three in the morning. He hadn't focused on a clock in a while.

Lucas decided to drop it, and sat down in the dirt beneath him. El cautiously seated herself next to him, drawing her knees up under her chin, and holding the flannel jumper – which was way too big for her – more firmly around her body, trying to block out the cold November air.

Lucas stayed looking at her face a little longer, her eyes a combination of broken pain and purposeful stubbornness. He could tell that El was ready to do whatever it took to get Mike back. Of course, they had all grown to like El in the week she'd been with them – even him – but the bond between her and Mike generally amazed him. As they had shown earlier that night, they were willing to die for each other.

El had never really had a fear of the dark, but being out here in the middle of the murky woods was not her preference. What she really wanted was to be back at Mike's house; the first place she'd felt belonging and safety. But more than that, she wanted *Mike* to be at Mike's house. El forced back sudden tears, knowing that he wasn't there now, but probably somewhere a lot more threatening.

Dustin had settled into a more comfortable position against the trunk of a tree, on El's other side, but Lucas doubted any of them would be getting much sleep. He rubbed his temples as he was now able to think clearly since all the adrenaline was over. He wondered where Mike could be. Something told him his best friend wasn't dead. Lucas was sure that, somehow, he would know if he was. He was certain Mike was out there, alive.

And then there was Will. Lucas could only hope that Hopper and Joyce had managed to get him out of that wretched place. The upside down that-

"The upside down." Lucas muttered, out loud. Dustin twisted back around and both he and El turned to look at the African-American boy. He stared back at them, eyes wide and alert. "The upside down!

It must be where Mike is, that's why he disappeared! He got taken there when El killed the Demogorgon!"

Dustin sat bolt upright, realizing what this could mean. "If Hopper and Joyce are still in there looking for Will, maybe they might find Mike too!"

A flicker of hope passed through El's eyes as she decided Lucas was probably right. He wasn't dead. He was just in a different dimension. And with the Demogorgon gone, Mike was probably in no immediate danger. Even if they didn't find Mike, *she* certainly could. She could find him the same way she'd found Will. She could save him!

El's soothing thoughts were interrupted by the loud whirling sound of an incoming helicopter above them. She tensed up, heart increasing slightly as former fears were pulled back up to the front of her mind, threatening to overtake her.

She knew they were looking for her, wanting to drag her back to that hideous lab, and abuse her abilities for their own benefit. But she knew better now. She knew there was more to life than all those experiments. The never wanted to go back to that bad place. Ever.

Dustin placed a comforting hand on her trembling arm as the three of them stared up at the sky, the wind increasing around them with the impact of the helicopter, crossing directly over their heads. Luckily, the searching light beams failed to penetrate the thick layers of branches above. A few moments later, it carried on its way, further down the carpet of trees.

El didn't completely relax until the noise had entirely died down.

Dustin breathed a sigh of relief, his steady doubts finally fading. "See? We're practically invisible here." El offered him a small smile, grateful that Dustin and Lucas were always ready to put their lives at risk to help her.

El's eyes opened suddenly, and bright sunlight streamed into her face. She blinked groggily as the sound of birds chirping filled her ears, the events of last night slowly unfolding in her head. The forest floor was

crunchy and brittle beneath her. She didn't remember falling asleep, only now she seemed to have her head resting on Dustin's shoulder, who was still asleep along with Lucas.

El licked her lips, trying to figure out why she had awoken so hastily. She sensed something was wrong straight away, but just couldn't define it. Why did she feel so hazardous?

That's when El heard it; the sound of a twig snapping not far behind her. She froze.

3. Chapter 3

Hey, thanks to everyone who are still reading!

Loving ur reviews, long or small. Yeah... sorry about the second cliff-hanger. I hate them, but it seems I also LOVE THEM. I hope u like this chapter, this is where the themes of angst and drama live up to their name xD

Trying to contain her shaking terror, El haltingly glanced over her shoulder to find the source of the noise. Just behind the large oak tree they were all leaning on, she saw a figure walking slowly past them, through the shrubbery. Her eyes widened with anxiety, as the person crossed by mere inches from her face.

More twigs snapped under their feet, and that's when El realized there was more than one person. At least half a dozen people were swamping the area, only meters away from the kids' hiding place. El heard them quietly muttering to each other and was relieved to find that none of them had spotted her or the boys.

Yet.

"Let's try going further North," she heard a man's voice murmur. "She could have easily ran in that direction, there's more places to hide up there."

El swallowed. If she hadn't believed it before, his words were more than enough evidence to figure out these people were working for the Bad Men. She was still being hunted. And this forest, now flooded with daylight, was no longer a decent place to keep herself hidden from unwanted eyes. Especially since she was certain at least four of them had guns.

El waited for the small group to get far enough away, trying to keep as still as possible until they were out of earshot. One slight rustle could ruin everything. She just hoped neither of the boys started snoring or something.

When the voices and snapping of twigs retired into the distance enough to satisfy her, El let out a jittery breath she didn't know she'd been holding. She put a still shaking hand on Dustin's shoulder and shook his sleeping form. "D-Dustin?" she whispered, not quite ready to speak at a moderate volume, in case they could somehow still hear her. "Wake up."

After a few seconds, Dustin came around and sat up, yawning, readjusting his hat which had managed to stay on top of his head this whole time. The movement soon woke Lucas up too.

"You okay, El?" Lucas asked, tiredly, rubbing his eyes.

El shook her head and pointed in the direction the search group had taken. Dustin and Lucas followed her gaze, catching sight of the people. The bad men were turned away from the kids, but it still set the boys on edge.

Dustin sucked in a breath. "Crap," he muttered. "We're gonna have to go. Just in case they come back." He grabbed his backpack and stood up, followed by Lucas and El.

"Where are we going?" Lucas asked, rushing to catch up with his fast-striding friend, El skittering after them.

Dustin stopped, and reached into his pocket, bringing out his compass. He stared at it closely, squinting to make out the tiny arrow in the sunlight. "Well, my house is on the border of these woods. It's mainly cut off and quiet most of the time, so I'm pretty sure no one will see El. If we start going East, we will probably get there in about..." Dustin stared at the trees around him, thoughtfully. "...about one mile?"

He glanced over at El to check it was okay, and she nodded wearily. He was certain he could keep El protected and hidden in his bedroom, at least until he was able to get help from the Chief or something.

Lucas was about to make a complaint that Dustin's *mum* might see El, but then he realized he'd left his backpack behind. "One second, I'll catch you up!" he yelled over at Dustin, before racing the twenty feet

back to the base where they had been sleeping.

He grabbed it and slung it over his shoulder. But before he'd even made a 180 degrees turn back towards Dustin and El, he saw a blur of black coming at him from his left hand side. Something heavy slammed into him and he was tackled to the ground, letting out a startled yell.

Dustin shot round, fear cascading through him as he took in the scene of someone wrestling with Lucas. It was one of the people from the search party hunting El. The man had clearly stayed behind without any of the three kids realizing.

El gasped as her friend struggled to fight off the man pinning him to the dirt. All she registered was Lucas in danger and without thought, she stepped forward raising her arm, ready to save him and send the man flying.

Dustin realized what she was about do and grabbed her roughly round the middle, shoving her to the floor, hiding them both from view behind a clump of bushes. They made a loud thud as they crashed into the scattered leaves, but Lucas' roaring shouts probably blocked out the sound. Dustin couldn't let any of these people see El; it would put them all in jeopardy, especially her.

El made to get up again, but Dustin grabbed her sleeve yanking her back out of sight. "No, El!" he whisper-shouted, not letting her go. "Don't let him see you!" El looked back at him, her brown eyes wide with concern and fear. Dustin knew her accusing look was daring him to come up with a better idea for rescuing Lucas.

Dustin felt torn about what to do; expose El, or leave Lucas and make a run for it with her. While he was having these conflicting thoughts, the man had begun shouting at Lucas.

"WHERE'S YOUR LITTLE FRIEND, HUH?" Lucas was still pinned under his arms, his face inches away from his own, spit sprinkling all over him. He didn't know how this man knew that he had anything to do with El; probably someone from the middle school incident had given a description of all three boys they had seen with her.

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Lucas yelled, the terror in his voice instantly giving him away. The man seemed to know he was lying too.

Gripping Lucas' coat with one hand, the man pulled his gun out from the holster, aiming it at Lucas' head. "I'll ask you again; WHERE IS YOUR FRIEND?"

Lucas could only gape in horror at the gun only centimetres away from him. "I-I..."

This time, Dustin didn't try to stop El as she darted out of the bushes. He couldn't, not with Lucas in this immediate danger.

The man's gun was suddenly ripped out of his clutch. It shot across the forest and smashed into a tree, breaking in half.

He looked up in time to see a furious young girl with a shaved head and pink dress, before he was blasted backwards several feet, his grip on Lucas subsiding, a crack ringing out as his body hit the solid bark, where he lay on the ground unmoving.

Lucas fell to the floor, grunting. El rushed over to him, grabbing hold of his arm and pulling him back to his feet. Dustin tumbled out from his hiding place and the three of them sprinted off at full speed, terrified another man with a gun might be lurking nearby. El wiped her nose as fresh blood started to ooze over the already-dried batch.

"Come on, this way!" Dustin bawled, his voice cracking, as they headed East in the direction of Dustin's house, his hat finally flying off his head, as the wind raced past him.

It dropped to the floor among the leaves and soil, with a soft thud, its owner already far off in the distance.

White.

He hadn't realized until just now how bright the colour actually was. Powerful and predominant. It illuminated his blurry vision, causing him to squint his eyes shut again.

When he reopened, the white had settled down. He realized he had been staring at a ceiling. Just a clear-white ceiling.

Confusion ebbed into his mind as the young boy tried to piece together what had happened, where he was, and why he was glaring at a white ceiling.

His eyes travelled down from the ceiling, to the equally-as-white walls. Windowless walls, lined with bricks. There was one door, placed across the room from him.

He shifted slightly feeling soft fabric beneath him, of a narrow bed. He sat up, causing his head to start spinning painfully. He groaned, and reached to touch it-

"LET ME GO!" Mike bellowed, pure fear ripping through him as he refused to stop struggling.

Crap, Mike thought, as the memories surged back into him. He hadn't managed to run.

Brenner had got him. He was stuck inside Hawkins Lab.

This sent a supply of panicked thoughts through him.

I'm trapped here!

What's going to happen to me?

What's going to happen to El?

El.

Mike raised his other hand to his head, trying to control his shaking breaths. It was El who Brenner wanted. Not him. He was worthless, useless. But not El. She *was* useful, or at least her telekinesis was.

Brenner was using him to get El, thinking she would come and save him. With a sinking distress, Mike realized he was probably right. El would want to come for him. She'd be forced back to the lab, with him being the bait.

"Oh El," Mike murmured, voice breaking. He hoped that, for whatever reason, she *wouldn't* come to him. He hoped that Dustin and Lucas and everyone else would keep her away, keep her *safe*, like he had tried to do the entire week she'd been with him. He'd already failed that job enough times, he couldn't bare to do it again.

Locking down his daunting thoughts, Mike began to focus on other things, such as his current situation. Mike cautiously slid off the bed he had been lying on, his shoes meeting the hard marble floor. He was still wearing the same clothes he had on before, even his coat, all still a little grungy from being in the upside down. His backpack was gone though.

He reached the door and pushed the handle down. As he suspected, it was locked. He still shoved into it a few times, hysteria getting the better of him.

He wondered how long they were going to keep him sealed in here. Was someone going to let him out? Or were they just going to wait for El to turn up first? The thought made him wince, at the expense of both him and El.

He had no clue of the time, if it was day or night. All he knew were the bright lightbulbs that lit up the small area. Things had only gone downhill from the haunting moment El had said goodbye, and he had felt continuously trapped ever since.

Mike turned around and lent against the door, sliding down to the ground as sudden tears of torment spilled down his cheeks. He longed for the embrace of someone safe and familiar, like El, or his friends, or his mom, or even Nancy.

It eventually came to his attention what the black thing was, held up in a corner of the ceiling. Mike stared in horror, as what was unmistakably a camera stared back at him. He shouldn't have been surprised really, he was their hostage after all, they were bound to have cameras turned on him. But the thought of someone watching his every move at every second made him retch with sudden nausea.

Things got worse when he noticed a piece of paper taped up above the white-covered bed he had lay on just before. It contained a kid's

drawing of two stick-figured people. Above the smaller one, he could vaguely make out the number '11'.

Mike's heart dropped, knowing exactly where he was now. This had been El's room. The room she had grown up in for the first twelve years of her life, as a science experiment. The room they were keeping *him* in now, like some twisted game.

It was fortunate he hadn't eaten anything for a long time, or he would have surely been physically sick.

4. Chapter 4

Hey, everyone still reading!

I know my chapters are really short at the moment, but once a get a little better at this, they'll probably get longer. Thank you to everyone who followed, favorited, reviewed or simply reads this story, u've no idea how much it means to me. Anyway, I'll shut up now. Here is chapter 4 :)

Steve's car pulled up in front of the Wheeler residence. He glanced over at the girl sat next to him. "Alright, here we are."

Nancy offered him a small smile, before staring out the window, daylight hardly detectable in the early hours of the morning.

Jonathan had to rush to the hospital after finding out his brother was there, so Steve, still loitering in his house after the whole Demogorgon event, had offered to drive Nancy back home. It had been quite a silent journey, both lost in their own thoughts.

Steve ran a hand through his hair, exhaling. "So, are we okay now?"

Nancy rubbed her head, her love life the last thing on her mind right now. She opened his door and got out. "Look, I don't know, I'll see you later, okay?" Before shutting it, she added "Thanks for the ride."

Nancy trudged up her driveway, listening to Steve's car speeding off. She honestly couldn't wait to sleep for the rest of the day, if she could, and forget about her bedevilled thoughts for a while. This week had changed a lot for her, and Barb's death still hadn't properly clicked in her mind. There was still a part of her that blamed herself, and it wouldn't go away.

Nancy pushed her front door open, quietly in case her parents were somehow still asleep.

She hardly got two steps in the hallway, before there was an outcry of "Nancy!" and familiar arms were thrown round her, pulling her

into a tight hug.

Nancy bewilderedly hugged her back. "M-Mom?" She knew they were probably worried about her, and she'd been expecting some yelling, but not *this*. "What's wrong?"

Her mother pulled away, and Nancy noticed tear tracks staining her face. Karen briefly glanced behind her daughter at the door, as if expecting someone else. Her face fell slightly. She turned back to Nancy, trying to compose herself. "I thought he might be with you."

"Who?" Nancy demanded straight away, trying not to jump to any conclusions. But already, her heart was thumping a little faster in her ribcage. She needed to hear it. "Mom, *who*?"

"Mike is missing," Karen's voice shook.

In a daze, Nancy walked further into her house. She was suddenly aware of her dad having a heated argument with someone on the phone, and Holly was anxiously sat on the couch, sucking her thumb.

"Do you have any idea where he could be?" Karen continued, gently grabbing Nancy's shoulder.

Nancy thought back when she had last seen him. "The school-"

"We looked there," Karen explained. "We've called a few people, but no one knows..."

Nancy let her mom's hysterical voice fade out of hearing. She'd *left* him at the school, only focusing on her furious anger aimed at the Demogorgon for her best friend's death, wanting revenge. Maybe if she'd stayed with him- Nancy covered her mouth, sickening dread settling in.

But he'd been with his friends. "Lucas and Dustin-"

"They're missing too," Karen retorted. "We're going to the Police Station as soon as it gets light enough, okay?" Karen held Nancy's face, staring intently at her. "I'm just- I'm glad *you're* safe, honey. And I'm sure he's fine..." she trailed off, sounding no where near convincing.

Of course, Nancy knew more than her mother did – the whole other side of the story she had to keep top secret – but the disappearance of the three boys confused even *her*. Was Eleven with them? Why hadn't they come home? There were a few conclusions in her head, some more disturbing than others, but she refused to think about them.

Nancy decided to stay with her parents for now, since she doubted her mom was letting her back out of her sight. She swallowed down her newfound fear. This wasn't the end.

She was going to get answers, somehow.

Will toyed with the mix tapes his brother had given them, just enjoying their presence as they continued to speak to him. Saying he'd had a 'rough' week was putting it lightly. Very lightly. It was a week he never wanted to experience again.

The last thing he remembered from That Place was his mom's distraught face staring down at him, as she cried that she loved him anything in the world.

But now he was home. Well, home enough with his mom and Jonathan sat around him in the hospital bed, their faces expressions of reassured and relieved happiness after a week of torture and not knowing if he was okay.

He still had questions, but this was really all he wanted for now; his family and his friends. It had been far too long since he'd been with them.

"Are my friends *here*?" the boy quietly asked. Will wondered if his friends were sat in the waiting room, probably worried about him. If they were, he wanted to see them; they never failed to cheer him up. He could do with one of Dustin's jokes right about now.

Joyce shifted, slightly. "No, sweetheart, they're not here yet. I'm sure they'll visit later though, okay?"

"Oh...okay," Will replied, shrugging it off. He'd catch up with them soon anyway, once he was allowed out of this hospital.

The friends in question – most of them anyway – were currently running out of the woods' boarders at a hectic pace, Lucas in the lead, then Dustin and El right behind him.

They could see Dustin's house now, situated on the outskirts of the forest just like he said. There wasn't a soul in sight, sans the three fatigued kids.

As they neared the residence, Dustin gave a sigh of relief when he saw he'd left his bedroom window unlocked. And his house was fortunately all on one level.

Dustin shoved at the glass and it gave way easily, the window drifting wide open. "Okay, here we go," he panted, as he and Lucas helped hoist an unsteady El up and over the ledge. They both then followed her in afterwards.

Dustin slammed the window shut and drew the curtains, not taking any chancing of El being seen, while Lucas and El collapsed on his bed, exhausted from running almost an entire mile.

After a few minutes, Lucas asked managed to ask, "Do you think they followed us here?"

"I don't think so," came Dustin's reply, as he reached up and his hand met his curly mop of hair. "Aw, crap, my hat."

Lucas scoffed, and sat up. "Forget about your hat, we need to come up with a plan! And we deffinatly need Hopper's help."

El's wide, brown orbs travelled from one boy to the other, as they continued to argue about what to do next.

"We both need to go to the police station, and explain this to Hopper," Lucas insisted. "Besides, our parents are probably there..." Both boys were hit with a slight wave of guilt, as they'd likely caused their families to worry a lot, by not coming home.

"What about El?" Dustin demanded.

"We can't take her with us, are you crazy?"

"But if we leave her, who knows what will happen?"

A growing anger was starting to form inside of El, as she sat quietly in the corner of the bed, arms hugged around her knees. Each minute they spent wasting time arguing was another minute Mike was away from her, in someplace bad.

"No," El voiced, loudly. Both boys shut up and turned to look at her in awe; she spoke so infrequently. "You go, I stay," she continued, speaking with such affirmative, they didn't dare question her decision.

"O-Okay," Dustin answered her, starting to slide off the bed. It was the first time he took in what they looked like; their clothes were grubby and dishevelled from spending the night sleeping in the forest. "I think we all need to change first though; you guys can borrow some clothes."

He hastened over to his closet and began rooting through it.

Lucas gave a small laugh. "It's kind of *déjà vu* for you, isn't it?" he commented to El.

El stared back at him, blankly.

"Oh, I mean..." Lucas mentally hit himself, forgetting there were many phrases El still didn't know. "You know, like how you've done this before? You borrowed clothes off Mike..." He trailed off, as El's face of curiosity turned to one of remorse and discomfort. Probably best not to mention Mike right now, Lucas resolved sadly.

El's increasing sadness was interrupted as a pair of jeans flew into her face, followed by a T-shirt. She grabbed at them, startled.

"There you go," Dustin proclaimed, tossing the other pair over to Lucas. "Okay, El, c'mon, you can get changed in the bathroom." He grabbed her hand, and pulled her off the bed, the clothes scrunched up in her other arm. He led her out of his bedroom, and through the door next to it.

Déjà vu, El thought meekly, as she stepped into the tiled room.

"You can get changed and cleaned up now, okay El?" Dustin remarked on her face still covered with dried blood. "We're just next door." He then turned to leave, keeping the bathroom door open for her, the way she liked.

El gripped the handle, asset on closing the door entirely – she'd already done it once before, but she hesitated, her brain compelling her to keep a small gap. Mike had been with her the last time she had done it. He wasn't here now.

When Mike had left her, so had her new fixated bravery; her phobias were brighter now, and old memories she tried to force down were clearer. With Mike, things had become easier, she had found it effortless to be happy and contented. If he had been next to her, closing this door would have been simple.

She pulled her hand away, leaving the door ajar, and turned away from it, dropping her newly owned clothes to the floor, and concentrating on her reflection in the mirror.

Her face was caked with dirt and blood painted her upper lip. Turning on the tap, she scrubbed water on it until it was clean. El then peeled off her fleece and pink dress, also coated in filth.

El grasped the clean clothes and brought them to her face, inhaling the scent. They smelt of Dustin. That was okay; El was grateful for anything that didn't smell of the lab.

But a small part of her – or a very large part – was overcome with a longing for these clothes to contain a different scent, a scent she missed so very much.

Of course, Dustin's clothes were too big for her; the jeans trailing over her feet and onto the floor, and the baggy T-shirt coming down almost to her knees. But El didn't care, simply rolling up the jeans so she could walk properly.

Entering Dustin's bedroom again, she discovered her two friends sat back on Dustin's bed, wearing fresher clothes, eating their way through a pile of candy.

"Is that better, El?" Dustin asked, shovelling the rest of his chocolate bar into his mouth, and standing up, followed by Lucas.

El nodded slowly. Lucas abruptly shoved a walkie talkie into her hands. "We're going to the police station now, okay?" the black-haired boy explained to her. "Dustin has got the other one in his backpack. If you really need to talk to us, use this. And we'll do the same."

"Yeah, you'll be safe here," Dustin assured her, tying the laces of his shoes back up. "There's candy if you're hungry. And if you're lonely, you can talk to Yertle," Dustin gestured at the large glass tank stored in the corner of his room, consisting of his tortoise.

El inquisitively stared at over at it, not realizing it had been an animal inside. She turned back to the boys, walkie talkie clutched in her hands.

"You sure you're going to be okay?" Dustin asked, grasping her shoulders, eyes watching hers.

El took a deep breath, and nodded. "Yes."

Dustin pulled her into a hug. "We'll be back soon," he commented. *And we'll find Mike*, he added silently.

El let him go, and hugged Lucas too. She watched them exit Dustin's bedroom – he again left the door slightly open for her.

El finally heard the front door slam. She was alone.

It was still better then last time, when she'd been alone in the woods, after feeling guilty for hurting Lucas. Last time, she didn't know if they were coming back. This time, she knew they were.

El looked down at the walkie talkie in her hands. She shakily pulled up the antenna.

But it wasn't Dustin or Lucas she was about to try and contact.

5. Chapter 5

Hay, everyone!

(Lmao Finn's birthday today aghhhhh)

I'm just gonna say, I'm sorry - I KNOW this chapter ain't that good, and it's shorter than the others, and I'm terrible at plot-twists xD You can call it a filler chapter if you want. I'll try and actually surprise you in later chapters, I promise. Until then, hope you enjoy chapter 5! (Srsly, I'm actually hoping).

Dr Martin Brenner glanced impassively at the screen, currently filming the young boy in Room Eleven, who was sat in the corner quietly sobbing. He knew the boy was innocent, unlike most people he dealt with, but keeping him here was necessary. Absolutely necessary.

The last few days had been a continuous journey of trying to catch up to Eleven and bring her back, an endless game of cat and mouse, as she seemed to always stay one step ahead of him. Of course, it had turned out harder than he expected – the girl had found herself some help – and now she appeared to have vanished into thin air.

For the time being at least.

The scientist knew she wasn't dead. He'd raised her for her whole life; he knew she was strong, strong enough to withstand the Demogorgon – her powers were substantial. She was out there somewhere, hiding. He had all his soldiers out looking for her, but he knew soon enough she would be back, willingly if not forced. She would come back and resume her important role as his spy, his secret weapon.

Brenner believed this boy was finally the answer to Eleven's return. Once she learned he was here, with those special abilities she possessed, she'd come for him. He knew this because in that single moment he had finally got his hands on her, it had been *his* name she had called out repeatedly. *Mike*. It was *him* she had reached out to, not Brenner. And something like that was dangerous for Brenner; and

it could have been fatal, if it wasn't for what he had come across only minutes later.

It was a stroke of luck to find the boy stuck in that dimension. The rest had come all too easy, in his opinion. Now Brenner just had to decide what to do with the boy after Eleven had-

His thoughts were halted by the office door hurriedly opening and shutting again, as one of his men came rushing in, horboring something in his hand.

"*Brenner*," he blurted out, voice filled with a sense of urgency.

"This had better be important," was the scientist's only reply. He had more planning to attend to; when Eleven finally did come back, things needed to run smoothly, or he could lose his most prized possession forever.

"It is. It's her! One of the guards says he was attacked by her at the North-East side of Hawkins woods, while she was with those two boys."

Brenner smirked, needing no confirmation on who *her* was. So, she was close after all.

The soldier in front of him continued, "and we think we know which direction she went in, judging by where we found this." He held out the object he'd been carrying.

Brenner received it and inspected it closely. Through the soot and dust upon it from the forest, the colours red, blue and white were still visible.

Brenner was holding what was unmistakably Dustin's hat.

Chief Hopper pinched the bridge of his nose as three sets of families crowded round his desk, pounding him with questions and demanding to know where their kids were.

Of course, even after the exhausting episode of saving Will's life – thank god that kid was finally safe – with Joyce, Hopper still needed

to come into work; the chaos of last night's events would have caused an uproar among the residents of Hawkins, and many of them would be coming to the police station looking for answers.

But he hadn't expected for three kids – the three kids he had meant to be protecting at that – to suddenly disappear. What was worse was, he had a gut feeling about what had happened to them, and if he was right, then it was entirely his fault, which he couldn't feel more awful about.

When he'd revealed to the people at Hawkins Lab where 'their little science experiment' was hiding, he had told them – he *told* them – to leave those three boys alone. Why had he taken their word for it? Clearly, working by the laws wasn't something they did; experimenting on little kids and uprooting other dimensions was the limit.

If that was the case, he'd just sacrificed *four* innocent children, for the sake of one.

Hopper couldn't understand *why* Hawkins Lab would want the boys, if they already had Eleven. Unless they had seen something they weren't supposed to. Or if they had tried to save Eleven and had gotten caught in the process. It probably wasn't too hard to rile up Brenner and his cronies.

He knew he had to fix this, but there was a restriction to the amount of information he could give to the concerned relatives, apart from Nancy who already knew everything. She stood nearer the back of the room behind her parents, eyes avoiding his, and furiously staring at the wall instead. She didn't try to say anything, letting her parents do all the yelling.

Nancy knew Hopper was on her side, she *knew* he had saved Will's life, but something was eating inside her screaming that he couldn't be trusted.

Everyone else clustered up in the Chief's small office was confused and totally oblivious.

There was no way Hopper was about to tell them there was a

possibility their children could have been abducted by corrupted scientists.

Upon reaching the police station, Dustin and Lucas pushed through the main doors, feeling a necessity to be as fast as possible (they had run up all the way from Dustin's house), and sped up to the counter, where Flo was working.

"Hello, can I help you?" she asked, smiling and staring from one to the other, as the boys breathlessly tried to regain their voices. Then recognition crossed over her face and she gasped. "Oh, goodness, it's you two!" She rushed around from the counter and ushered them down the hall. "Your parents have been so worried about you!"

Dustin and Lucas glanced at each other, worriedly. Getting Hopper alone might be a little difficult.

The door to the Chief's office rocketed wide open in Flo's haste. "Hopper, they're here!" she yelled, causing the whole crowd to spin round. There was a slight pause. Hopper's guilt subsided slightly at the sight of them. They weren't being held hostage after all.

"DUSTIN!" His mom shrieked, before wrapping him in a tight hug and smothering him with kisses, despite his loud complains of "Ew, mom!"

Lucas' parents were also fussing over their son, and his little sister Erica, who was trying not to look relieved, still gave him a delighted hug round the middle.

Karen hovered in the background, Holly planted on her hip. For a brief second, she had been overjoyed at the entrance of the children, but after seeing her son not with them, her dread had doubled. He wasn't with his friends, like she had hoped.

The boys' parents never got around to demanding to know where their children had been, because Karen had already set Holly aside and had hastily barged into the middle of them. "Where's Michael? Where's my son?" she asked frantically, panicked gaze flickering between the two kids. "Was he with you? Do you know where he is?"

Dustin and Lucas could only stare back at her with forlorn expressions, unable to find the right words in this circumstance, to assuage her terror-stricken state. Of course, they had a sneaking suspicion to where Mike was, but they could hardly tell his *mother*, who had no knowledge of the supernatural events in Hawkins.

When no one answered her questions, Karen grabbed hold of the boy closest to her – which happened to be Dustin – and started shaking him, crying, "Please! Do you know where he is? Where's my boy? Where can I find him?"

"Mom, *stop*," Nancy exclaimed, gently prising her mother away from the agitated boy. Karen cried into her daughter's shoulder instead. Nancy held back her own sobs, now even more terrified for her brother's whereabouts.

Dustin and Lucas met the gaze of the Chief. Hopper read the worry in their eyes; something was wrong. It didn't take a genius to figure out it probably had something to do with Mike's absence.

Trying not to let his darker imagination run wild, Hopper cleared his throat and stood up. "Alright, would everyone please wait outside? I need to have a chat with these two boys, alone."

There were a few protests from the parents, but Flo finally managed to guide them all out, shutting the door behind her.

Dustin and Lucas hesitantly dropped into the seats in front of his desk. Hopper glared from one to the other. "Okay, start talking. What's going on?"

Lucas opened his mouth, but Dustin talked over him, "Could you just tell us, is Will...?"

"Yes, he's back now! And he's okay," Hopper assured them, almost at once. "He's with Joyce and Jonathan at the hospital." He didn't feel like going into detail about how that had panned out. Luckily, the kids didn't ask for it.

The two boys breathed a sigh of relief, happy that at least one of their friends was secure again.

"Anyway," Lucas took a shaky breath. "We don't have a lot of time, we're trying to keep El safe."

Hopper's heart quickened as he registered Lucas' words. "...El?"

El sat with her back against Dustin's closet, repeatedly turning the knobs on the walkie talkie, but all she heard was static. Her nose was starting to bleed profusely again.

Each second that passed when she failed to hear any sign of him, the more she dreaded he was... *gone*. Just the thought of it made her chest hurt in agony.

Exactly twenty-three seconds later, the static sharply cut off. El held her breath, holding the gadget closer to her ear, listening, waiting, hoping.

And then she heard it.

Through the jittered sound of the radio, she could evidently hear breathing. El inhaled sharply and then fell silent again, concentrating. Blood leaked a little more vigorously from her nose, but she couldn't lose focus, not now, not before she was certain it was him.

The breathing was uneven, hitching every few seconds. She soon noticed there was also whispering coming from the speaker, so quiet, she couldn't make it out.

She mentally reached out further, ignoring the blood dripping over her lips.

El heard one word before she reached her limit and the signal snapped entirely, dropping her sweat-smeared walkie talkie and slouching against the wood behind her, gasping for breath. But it was all she need to hear to have hope. Her promise was not yet broken.

"Eleven."

6. Chapter 6

Hay, everyone still reading!

I only have three things to say:

Merry Christmas!

Plz leave a review

And here is chapter six :) (Hope u enjoy)

Karen stood outside of the Chief's office, keeping a tight hold on her eldest daughter's arm. She let out a rickety breath, her moment of hysteria dying down. But the festering dread was still there.

Mrs Henderson, clearly still a little miffed about Karen harassing her son, bid her a shifty look before retreating to the chairs lined up along the corridor to wait for Dustin.

But Mr Sinclair halted beside her, and put a supporting hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry your son wasn't here," he confessed, eyes filled with genuine concern and sympathy. "I'm sure he's fine, and he'll be home soon."

Karen offered him a grateful smile, before he moved to join his wife and daughter on the chairs. His words were comforting, but not much help. Karen couldn't bring herself to believe them. What if it *wasn't* alright? What if her boy was in trouble, hurt, d-?

Ted cleared his throat and stepped up to his wife. "Honey, we may as well go home now. We've given a statement to the police, there's nothing else we can do," he explained, gently.

Karen let out a shocked laugh, anger starting to flare up inside her. "Do *nothing*?" she questioned, "Our son is *missing*, and you don't care?"

"What? Of course, I care," Ted snapped back, immediately.

"Mom..." Nancy cautioned, sensing a large argument emerging, and

lightly pulling on her arm. Now was not the time for her parents to be getting into meaningless fights.

Karen snatched her arm away, refusing to back down. "Oh, you care so *much*, Ted, but all you're going to do is go home and watch *television*, like nothing is wrong," she stated, voice wavering and rising slightly.

Ted stared back at her, baffled. "Karen, here is *nothing* we can do," he repeated firmly.

Something inside Karen snapped. "*Because you've never done anything worthwhile for your children, have you?*" she all but screamed. "*Why start now?*"

For a moment, no one dared to speak, as Karen's blunt but truthful words waned through all their heads.

Ted turned away from his wife and left the building without another word, while Holly burst into noisy tears, scared of her mother's yells.

Nancy gritted her teeth, refusing to look her mom in the eye. She picked up her crying little sister and left to sit with the other parents. If she'd try to stay, she'd end up letting out all her guilt, fear and sorrow on her mom, even though this wasn't all Karen's fault.

Karen couldn't move. She stayed frozen in shock, watching helplessly as her family got ever-more torn apart.

Brenner sighed in frustration, as one of his guards exasperatingly explained why they had not tracked down Eleven yet.

"...know she's in the general area but we are not sure which house it could be. And checking every single one on Haven Road will bring attention to us," the guard finished. "What do you want us to do?"

So, finding the hat had only gotten them so far, and now they were at a lost end again. Brenner slowly shifted through the options he had in his mind. Eleven was probably hiding at one of her little friends' houses.

He wasn't about to let her slip away again. One way or another, this chase was going to end with him winning, he was certain.

Brenner suddenly remembered that, this time, he had something to *work* with. Someone that would most likely know *exactly* where his paramount Subject was.

The scientist turned in the direction of the live footage, eyes focusing on one screen in particular. The guard followed his gaze.

"He'll know," Brenner replied, simply. "Do whatever it takes to get him to tell you." The guard nodded curtly and started towards the door. Before he left Brenner added, "Just... don't kill him."

His plan was slowly fitting itself into place. To be quite honest, he didn't expect *or* intend for his guards to catch Eleven; they'd all miscarried that scheme enough times now. But the hunt on her tail would surely cause Eleven to have awareness, let her know she was never going to be left alone, she was never going to be *safe*. She belonged here in the Lab.

And as long as Brenner was alive, he was going to make that happen once again.

Hopper lit and inhaled a cigarette – God knew he needed one after all the information he'd just received.

"Okay, let me get this straight," he contributed, gradually piecing together the garbled story the two boys had blurted out. "Mike saved Eleven, and now he's vanished to who knows where – but you think the upside down – and you are currently hiding Eleven," he gestured at his cigarette at Dustin, "at your house."

The kids nodded vigorously.

So, Jim Hopper *wasn't* in the clear after all. Sure, the they hadn't got their hands on the girl, but his betrayal had led up to jeopardy of losing the Wheeler kid. Just great. And the boys had mentioned almost being caught in the forest. Now they'd been seen; Hawkins Lab would deffinatly know Eleven was alive. Which meant there was

no guarantee how safe the girl was, hiding out in Dustin's house, or for how long.

The Chief knew the boys had come to him for help. The question was, what could he do? Explaining to the Wheeler parents what had happened to their kid was undeniably out of the question, forbidden in fact. Going *back* to the Hawkins Lab to try and find Mike in the upside down was downright impossible; he wasn't about to make another shifty deal with those sociopaths.

There was also a chance the kid wasn't even *there*. Hopper wasn't as optimistic as the boys, and although he hated to admit it, the way Dustin had described the Demogorgon event – in rather unnecessary detail – had sounded a lot like Wheeler had somehow disintegrated along with the monster. He could only hope the boys' theory was the true one.

But there was one thing Hopper could do, and that was to keep the girl *safe*; he felt like he owed it to her after what he'd put her through. What was even better, he knew exactly where to hide her.

Coming to a decision, the Chief stood up from his desk, crushing out his cigarette. "Alright, listen up, you two," he voiced, gruffly. "You both tell your parents you got lost in the woods or something; make it believable. I'm going to take Eleven to a safer place, where they won't be able to find her,"

"Okay," Dustin replied, confidently as he and Lucas quickly arose from their seats.

Hopper glared at them. "You're *not* coming with me," he stated.

The boys stopped in their tracks, staring back at him in baffled anger.

"What, why not?" Lucas demanded, while Dustin fiercely added, "We *promised* we'd go back for her, we're not about to leave her!"

"You honestly believe your parents are going to let you run off again?" Hopper challenged them, angrily, swinging round away from the door to face them. "After you were gone for an entire night? Think again!" He authentically didn't need any more worried-sick

parents right now. "And the more people there are, the more dangerous it will be for your friend, Eleven. Do you really want that?"

He didn't wait for a reply, simply storming out of his office, leaving Dustin and Lucas at a loss for words.

He knew he had no right to be angry at those boys; they'd done a good job protecting the girl so far. But he wanted to be dealing with as little children as possible. He'd messed up a lot recently with them, and – to put it candidly – his babysitting ego was rather low at the moment. They'd be safer with their parents; out of danger, out of mind.

Dustin shared a look with his friend, as the door slammed shut. "S-She'll be fine, right?"

"Yeah," Lucas replied, hesitantly. "I mean... she knows Hopper."

The boys stood awkwardly in the now-silent Sherriff's office, unsure about what to do. Hopper had made it clear they were not welcome to tag along. But they knew they had enough faith in him to make sure El was kept hidden.

A thought snapped into Lucas' mind. "*Will*," he exclaimed. "We should go see him!"

"Right, yes," Dustin was already heading for the exit. "We're gonna need to tell him what's.... happened."

Karen sat rigidly in the corridor seats, her two daughters on either side of her. She knew there was no real reason to stay here in the police station. And she'd have to leave eventually; it wasn't fair on Holly.

But she didn't want to prove Ted right; that she should just sit at home and wait. Because, unlike Ted, she wouldn't be able to keep the problem as a side-thought. It was constantly clear on her mind. There must surely be something she could do, *something* she could help with to get her son back. Doing nothing was destroying her.

Nancy, on the other hand, was waiting at the police station for an entirely different reason. She wasn't there as moral support for her mother, although she was certainly worried about her.

She *refused* to be left in the dark, concerning her brother. Dustin and Lucas – and now Hopper too – all *knew* something she didn't. She wasn't leaving here without the truth, and then she wasn't giving up until she was sure Mike was safe again. Whatever she had to do, she'd do it.

Her head shot up, as she heard the heavy footsteps of Hopper approaching. He barely gave her a sideways look, strolling past all the parents towards the exit, his face a look of angered determination.

Without a second thought, Nancy leapt from her seat and raced after him, yelling "hey, wait!"

Hopper ignored the girl's protest, keeping his eyes on the door in front of him. He didn't have time to explain this all to Nancy.

But she didn't back down, and after she had caught up with him and grabbed his arm, he had no choice but to stop, and turn to face her, infuriated. "Look, kid, I haven't got the-"

"I'm coming with you," Nancy declared, relentlessly.

And after taking a proper look at her murderous face expression, Hopper realized she wasn't taking no for an answer.

Hopper hesitated, considering his choices. Nancy wasn't really a kid, she could take care of herself. She deserved to know the truth, and she could even prove helpful to him. She wasn't going to be scared off as easily, and there wasn't enough time for an argument, lives were possibly on the line.

Letting out a defeated sigh, he nodded. "Alright, let's go."

Her intent on following him out was cut short by her mom.

"Nancy?" Karen had quickly caught up to her, grabbing her daughter's wrist. "What are you doing? Where are you going?"

Nancy turned to look into her mom's panicked eyes. "Mom, I-I..." she stammered. "I have to go, I'm sorry." It hurt her heart to leave her mother, who was already scared out of her mind from her son's disappearance, but it was necessary if Nancy ever wanted to see Mike again. "I'm sorry," she repeated, before pacing after Hopper.

"No, wait!" Karen desperately refused to let go. "Nancy, wait, please stay, I can't – I *won't* lose you too!"

"Mom, I swear I'll be back!" Nancy hastily replied, worried Hopper was going to leave without her if she took too long. "Please, just trust me."

She finally managed to yank her arm free, and forced herself out the door. She mentally added her mom's terror to the list of things she had to feel guilty about.

Hopper was impatiently waiting beside his car, arms folded. When he caught sight of the teenager, he nodded his head in the direction of the car door. "Get in."

Nancy obediently seated herself in the passenger chair, sealing the door and buckling up her seat belt.

"Where are we going?" Nancy asked, while Hopper mirrored her actions.

He turned the keys to start up his car. "Right now? We're going to get Eleven."

7. Chapter 7

Hey, everyone!

So this first scene was kinda hard for me to write, but my friend *BCI603* talked me into it so... yeah, blame her

Anyway, here is chapter 7! :)

(I tried, okay?)

Silence.

It was one of the many things that was bothering him, for the stretching hours on end. It was so quiet, it was impossible drown out the faint buzzing of the lights above.

Occasionally, just for proof that he still existed, he'd say something out loud. And that word almost always happened to be "Eleven." It was the only word that reassured him, comforted him.

Being trapped inside this place had given him a lot of time to think things, and see things. But he didn't *want* to think about how he was the reason El was going to get caught again, he didn't *want* to see the exiguous furniture in the colorless room that El had spent her whole, miserable life in.

But he had to. They'd made him have to. *He* had. Brenner.

Mike hated that he was so useless. He hadn't been any help to El at all. When Brenner had temporarily captured her, he couldn't do anything except shout, while he was restrained from getting to her. When the Demogorgon had almost killed them all, he couldn't do anything except watch Lucas sling petty stones at it.

When El had sacrificed herself to *kill* the Demogorgon.... Yes, he had done something that time. But it was all for nothing, in the end. Now here he was, nothing but enticement to draw El back. And quite frankly, that was *worse* than being useless.

His thoughts were disrupted by the distinct sound of a lock clicking, followed by the door opening.

Straight away, his heart started drumming faster, as a million scenarios crossed through his mind. Had they managed to find El? Was it Brenner? *Were they going to kill him now?*

It wasn't Brenner *or* El, just two unfamiliar men who were most likely Brenner's guards.

It suddenly occurred to him that they were heading straight towards him. Terrified, Mike abruptly stood up from his corner and tried to run, to get as much distance between him and them as he could.

"Hold it!" one of them roared, grabbing the back of Mike's coat and slamming him against the wall, pinning him there. Mike, on the verge of hyperventilation, could only stare back wide-eyed and horrified. The man's eyes were only hard and hateful. "Haven Road," he spat. "You know it, kid?"

Yes, Mike knew it. He'd been there to visit Dustin several times, they all had. It was one of their designated hangouts, where Dustin's mom would make them cookies, and they'd all watch Star Wars for the umpteenth time.

But that was before he'd been taken. Before Will went missing. Before he'd met El. Before everything had turned into a hellish nightmare. Back when life had been happy and simple, when his biggest problem was not handing in a school assignment in time.

The man didn't wait for an answer, Mike was almost certain he already knew it. "What number does your friend live at?" he demanded viciously.

It took Mike's brain a few seconds to process *why* these people would want to know Dustin's address.

And then it clicked.

El was hiding there.

His first initial thought was, *thank God she's still safe*. But that relief

didn't last long. They were onto her, if they knew enough to know she was in Haven Road.

If he told them the address, El was as good as caught.

Mike vowed right then that he wouldn't tell them. He would *never* tell them. He would not betray El. Let them do their worst.

He immediately regretted that thought, after the man's fist came in contact with his jaw, a sound like thunder ringing out. A burning pain spread through his face.

"It's a simple question," the man taunted, keeping the boy glued against the wall. "Just tell us, and we'll let you go."

Mike wanted to scream. "No," he stated instead.

The next punch sent him hurling to the floor with a bang, as he hit the solid marble. He turned to stare up at the two men, their faces slightly blurry in his throbbing vision.

"What. Is. The. *Number*?" One of the men snarled, spacing out the words, glaring stoically down at Mike.

Mike wanted to speak, to say something cynical or rude to seem like he wasn't afraid, but his voice was gone, his breathing rapid.

The man's heavy boot collided with his torso. Agony shot through him as he felt – and heard – one of his ribs crack.

"*What's the number?*" The guard repeated, gripping Mike's coat and roughly shaking him, jarring his already injured ribs.

Panicking, Mike hastily tried pulling himself away from him. The other guard abruptly seized his left arm, holding him in place.

"You tell us, or I'll break your arm!" the guard threatened, ruthlessly.

"No," Mike croaked weakly, as his arm started to scream in protest. *He wouldn't tell them.* But the guard kept going, forcing his arm backwards. As the searing pain increased, Mike started yelling, "No, no! NO! NO PLEASE NO!" and realizing the man wasn't going to stop,

Mike all but screamed, "EIGHTEEN! IT'S EIGHTEEN!"

The pressure on his arm slackened, and Mike gasped with relief.

"You sure about that, kid?" the first one asked bluntly.

Mike didn't answer, the realization of what he'd just done slowly sinking in.

Shortly after, the men turned and left, leaving him sprawled on the ground, sobbing.

"El, I'm so sorry," he whispered brokenly, as he heard the door slam shut.

She was going to be found, and it was all his fault. Entirely *his* fault. His arm and ribs were aching, but it wasn't his new injuries that were hurting him the most.

Dustin and Lucas weren't entirely sure their parents bought their got-lost-in-the-woods lie, but after the kids awkwardly refused to answer their questions on certain details, they grudgingly accepted it. Of course, they didn't mention El being with them.

It took a lot more persuasion to let them go and visit Will.

"Mom, we haven't seen him in a whole *week*!" Dustin promptly complained, "we thought he was dead. We *need* to see him," while Lucas nodded in agreement.

Mrs Sinclair turned to her husband as they quietly considered what to do. Mrs Henderson didn't look quite as convinced. "But Dustie, I think we should go home for-"

"Yes, but can't we just spend some time with Will first?" Dustin couldn't let his mom go home just yet anyway; not until Hopper had managed to get El out of the house at least. "Just a quick visit?"

Twenty minutes later, both the Sinclairs' and Hendersons' cars were parked at Hawkins Hospital.

As the two boys neared the hospital doors, their parents not far behind them, they glanced at each other with concern. This was more than just a casual visit to their friend. They were going to have to tell Will – and most likely Joyce and Jonathan as well – what had happened to them, and more importantly, what had happened to Mike.

They hated to spring this news on Will, after everything he had been through, but they didn't really have another choice. It wouldn't be fair to keep it from him.

"Hi, how can I help you?" the lady behind the counter asked, brightly.

The boys stared up at her, unaware they had already reached the front desk.

"Uhh, we're here to see Will Byers?" Lucas informed her.

The lady nodded, analysing her clipboard. A few seconds later, she replied, "Room thirty-one."

Dustin blurted out a yell of "Thanks!" as he and Lucas bolted quickly into the corridor, their parents remaining in the waiting area.

Dustin speedily counted the doors as they ran past them. *Room 26, 27, 28, 29, 30*, "Thirty-one, here!" he called, and they both pushed on the door, bursting into the room.

The three people in the room looked up in alarm, but quickly relaxed when they saw who it was. Will's face lit up with delight at the sight of his best friends. And for a moment, the two boys forgot they had any problems at all.

"BYERS!" Lucas yelled happily, speeding over to Will's bed and practically jumping on him in his rush to give him a hug, while Joyce and Jonathan chuckled in the background.

"Oi, move!" Dustin demanded, playfully shoving Lucas away to get his hug in there too.

Will laughed – it felt so good to laugh – as he patted Dustin's back. Automatically, he looked behind Dustin to try and catch sight of his

third best friend, assuming he had been just behind them.

Dustin and Lucas spotted his glance and suddenly, the reunion wasn't quite as enjoyable anymore.

Joyce noticed their miserable expressions and asked worryingly, "Boys? What's wrong?"

"We..." Lucas cleared his throat and tried again. "We have a lot to tell you."

It had not been fun to watch the little colour that had returned to Will's face slowly drain away again, as Dustin and Lucas steadily filled out their story – now a little more practiced after telling Hopper.

Jonathan's expression was difficult to read, but Joyce's was one of upmost horror.

Will didn't know whether to cry or throw up. He thought everything was going to be alright again, after he had been rescued. He thought things were going to return to normal, or at least as normal as they could. But now Mike was missing, maybe even dead. If that was the case, returning to any kind of normal was pretty much impossible.

Mike, the first friend he'd made in Kindergarten. Mike, the person who had stuck by him throughout the years. Mike, the only reason he was always able to withstand bullies. Mike, who had taught him so much.

He didn't want to believe it.

Will accepted the hug his mom was pulling him into, leaning into her shoulder, trying to overcome the shock.

Lucas and Dustin wanted to reassure him that Mike wasn't dead, that they were sure he was still out there somewhere. But even *they* didn't know for certain. Instead, they stayed silent, watching the scene unfolding in front of them.

And Will was just about to start crying too, before they were all interrupted by an indistinct noise coming from Dustin's backpack.

They all jumped slightly. The noise quickly became detectable as a voice.

Dustin hurriedly slid his backpack off, and dived into it to retrieve his crackling supercom. El's inaudible voice rang out, laced with static.

"El, is everything okay?" Dustin spoke into it, before releasing the button and listening, while everyone else stared at him with increasing concern.

For a moment, El's fast breathing filled the room, before she fearfully replied, causing Dustin and Lucas to stare at each other in terror.

"They found me."

Hopper drove speedily through the streets, going at the maximum speed limit allowed. In a small town like Hawkins, Hopper was familiar with almost every residence. So, he knew which directions to turn in to reach the Henderson house.

He didn't know if he needed to rush or not, but decided the quicker he got there, the quicker Eleven would be safe.

Nancy sat silently next to him, staring straight ahead. Hopper had given her short interpretation of the story, but it told her enough to know what had happened to her brother. Nancy point-blank refused to believe he was dead; she was going to need evidence first. Until that turned up, she wasn't going to change her opinion.

There were still things she wanted to ask Hopper, questions she needed answering. But Nancy decided this wasn't the right time. Eleven was more important.

Hopper eventually pulled up in front of their destination. From what they could see, the house looked quite desolate and peaceful.

"Alright, you stay here," Hopper instructed her, before cautiously getting out the car – taking his rifle with him. *You could never be too careful.* Nancy watched him make his way to the front door, through the car window.

Hopper experimented with the handle, and found the door was already open. He tentatively stepped into the house, the door creaking.

"Hello?" He called out. "Eleven, are you there?"

He was greeted with silence.

8. Chapter 8

Hi, everyone!

Really sorry for the unusually slow update. It took me a while to figure out exactly how this story was gonna pan out. But the ideas finally came (at 1am in the morning) and this story is now back and rolling! Also, ty for all ur awesome reviews

So yeah... hope u enjoy chapter 8 :)

Hopper trekked down the corridor of Dustin's house with deliberate slowness, rifle held out in front of him. There was no sign of human life, except for his own breathing. Even the floor beneath his shoes decided to stay silent.

The boys had said she'd *be* here. What if Brenner had already-? Hopper reluctantly forced that feeling away.

"Eleven?" he tried again, calling into the calm atmosphere. He was answered by a clatter from behind him. Hopper spun round - heart skipping a beat - to the cause of the noise.

Dustin's cat gazed back at him. For a moment, they both stared at each other. Before Hopper scoffed and carried on his way, cursing out cats.

The door at the end of the corridor was partially open. Hopper reached it and gently pushed it open, glancing in. If he had to guess, he'd say this was *Dustin's* room, given its... state.

Piles of clothes and candy wrappers littered the carpet. Hopper stepped into it, the wrappers crinkling as he walked over them. He noticed a flash of colour that was vaguely familiar.

Hopper set his rifle down, to pick up the shirt on the floor. It was the same flannel shirt he had given Eleven to borrow, stained with brown from their time spent in the woods. He noticed the pink dress still crumpled on the rug.

So the girl had certainly been here at some point, that he was sure of.

And that's when he heard it; a slight scuffle. His head shot up towards the closet at the other side of the room. The doors were shut and there wasn't any more sound coming from it.

With a growing suspicion, Hopper neared the closet asking, "Eleven? Is that you?"

There was no reply.

He pulled at the handle and the door slowly creaked open, revealing a familiar face. As the brown eyes met his, Hopper couldn't help but smile slightly. *They hadn't taken her after all.* She was still okay, for the time being at least.

El stared up at him, sitting crossed-legged among Dustin's forgotten clothes, clutching two things in her hands. Her eyes flickered with recognition at the sight of Hopper, but there was still a sense of caution.

The object in her left hand – which appeared to be a supercom – crackled slightly, and then Dustin's voice was ringing through it.

"El, are you still there? Are you okay?" he demanded, frantically. "El, c'mon, please answer!"

Hopper crouched down and reached for the supercom, glancing at El to check it was okay. She didn't try and restrain him, which he took as a yes. He held it up and answered, "Hey, kid, yeah, it's just the Chief, you can relax."

There was a pause on the other end. "Oh, that's great! Yeah, okay, thanks. Please just... you know,"

He didn't have to finish for Hopper to know what he meant. *Look after her. Keep her safe. Don't let the bad men get her.* And he was very intent on doing all of that anyway. "I will, kid," he answered, before shutting off the connection.

He focused back on El, suddenly aware of the other object – other *moving* object – she was holding. "What is *that*?" He found himself

asking out of sheer bewilderment.

"Yertle," El replied simply, smiling fondly down at the tortoise.

Hopper decided not to ask, sticking to what was important. "Listen, Elev-... *El*, it's not safe for you here, but if you come with me, I know a place where you *will* be protected, where they won't find you."

El registered his words, and frowned. She knew Hopper wasn't one of *those* people, he meant well, but her trust didn't stretch very far beyond Dustin and Lucas. Anyway, they'd said they'd come back for her.

She shook her head, fiercely. "No."

Hopper exhaled deeply, thinking about what to say next. It wasn't like he could force her. Yet if she stayed here, she was likely to get discovered by the wrong people soon.

Before he could speak, El was talking again. "I'm.... *waiting*. For Dustin and Lucas."

"Kid, they can't *help* you," Hopper tried to reason with her, trying to contain his rising frustration, as she stayed sitting stubbornly in the closet. "But I can."

El opened her mouth to protest again, before they were interrupted by a window smashing from the other room.

El started, staring in the direction the sound had come from. The noise was quickly followed by more glass breaking, and then voices. It wasn't someone trying to help her. This time, they had well and truly found her.

Hopper swore loudly, "El, we have to go right now. *Right now!*" El didn't try and prevent him when he grabbed her arm and pulled her out of the closet, unsteadily landing on her feet. She focused on her quick breathing, sprinting after Hopper as he tugged her towards Dustin's bedroom door.

He burst through it and then they were in the corridor, adrenaline coursing through them.

El's breathing hitched as they passed the open door to the room where the bad men stood, faces turned away from them. They were *right there!* Terrified, El slammed the door with her mind.

This caused an uproar of shouts from inside the room. A bullet abruptly punctured the wooden door, buzzing just past her head as she ran past it.

Half way up the corridor, the front door – still open – only a few seconds away, the door she'd just slammed burst open again as the men spilled into the hall way, guns poised in the direction of Hopper and El.

El thought fast. With a twitch of her wrist, the heavy bookcase right behind her was falling. It smashed into the wall opposite with a loud thud that shook the whole house, hiding them from view and the rain of bullets.

Nancy had heard the commotion and gunshots that had erupted from inside the house. Without thinking, she opened the car door and jumped out, intent on helping Hopper any way she could.

She hardly got two steps, before the front door soared open, Hopper and El emerging like a frenzied stampede. El turned back around to telekinetically lock the door, to slow down the men still inside.

"GO! GET IN THE CAR!" Hopper yelled. Nancy didn't need telling twice, tumbling back into her seat, just as Hopper reached the car and shoved El through the door after her, before shutting it.

Crap, Hopper mentally cursed realising he'd left his rifle in the house. Instead, he was still holding El's supercom. *Too late now*. He rushed around to the other side of the car, closing the door behind him and turning the engine on.

The car revved up with increasing speed, zooming down the street. El tuned back to look out the window to see that the soldiers had almost kicked the door down completely, the hinges protesting. But they were well out of shooting range by now.

El twisted back around and breathed a sigh of relief, absent-mindedly

wiping her bloody nose, as the car continued up the road leaving the chaos behind it. She was suddenly aware that she was half-sat on top of Nancy, and was still holding onto Yertle, not having had a chance to put him back.

Hopper wasn't looking forward to the phone call the police station was most likely going to receive some time today, when Mrs Henderson came home to find her house ransacked.

But it was a good job he had come when he did. If he'd only been five minutes later...

"What the *hell* happened in there?" Nancy demanded, glaring accusingly but worriedly at Hopper.

Hopper exhaled through his nose, gripping the steering wheel. "We were just lucky to make it out in time."

"Will they find us again?"

"No, not way out here."

Nancy nodded, slowly. She glanced down at the nervous girl sat next to her, wearing too-big clothes and a camouflaged bandana round her head. And if she wasn't mistaken, there was a tortoise bundled up in her overly-large T-shirt.

There was silence for a few minutes, everyone lost in their own thoughts.

Now that they had Eleven, Nancy decided it was the right time to change the topic. "So, when are we getting my brother back?" she asked, bluntly.

"When we know where he is," Hopper swerved the wheel round, the car starting to trudge through a road surrounded by trees. It rocketed up and down on the rugged ground.

"You're going to *try*, aren't you?" Nancy persisted, steadily watching him even though he didn't meet her gaze. "Because I'm sure he's- I *know* he's..."

"Alive," the reply came from the girl huddled beside her.

Both Hopper and Nancy turned to look at her. Hopper quickly turned back to the road, but asked carefully, "What did you just say, kid?"

El gingerly reached to grab the supercom lying beside Hopper. "I... *heard* him. On this."

"You *heard* him?" Nancy took hold of El's shoulders, staring at her with a pensive expression. "He's *alive*?"

El nodded earnestly in reply. Nancy choked on a sob and brought the girl she hardly knew into a tight hug, overcome with relief. It took El by surprise, but she didn't protest. She liked the warmth and comfort.

Hopper endured their embrace for moment of two, before clearing his throat. "El, do you also happen to know *where* he is?"

El pulled away from Nancy to face him. "No. Lucas and Dustin think... upside down."

Hopper sighed, grimly. Of course, that was the most likely place for him to be. This wasn't going to be easy. Hopper tried to keep on the positive side of things; at least the kid was *alive*. But he knew he had to get him back *soon*, one way or another.

One step at a time.

Nancy and El stared questioningly at Hopper, when he pulled his car to a stop in the middle of nowhere. Trees closed in around them, and darkness was starting to fall.

"Why did we stop?" Nancy asked, cautiously glancing around her.

Hopper opened his car door to get out. "It's a five-minute walk to the cabin," He explained gruffly, proceeding to tread in the right direction. "Can't drive a car through here."

Nancy started to follow him, but hesitated when she saw El was still sat unmoving in her seat. The young girl's eyes were full of wariness and a hint of fear.

Nancy smiled warmly at her. "You can trust me, you know?"

El nodded slowly, not quite convinced.

"Look," the older girl took a deep breath. "I want to find Mike just as much as you do. That's my *brother* out there. I also want to keep you safe."

"Safe?"

"Yes."

El believed Nancy's words. She wanted Mike back too; they were both on the same side. El smiled lightly, and started to edge her way out the car, keeping a firm hold on Yertle and the supercom.

El stuck close to Nancy as the two of them followed Hopper through the wilderness, her sneakers starting to get incredibly thick with mud from all this forest-hiking she seemed to be doing lately.

It was different from the pristine, sterilised atmosphere she had spent her whole life in, but El realised she preferred this environment a lot more, compared to the lab.

Here, she was with people who wanted to *help* her, not use her.

Hardly five minutes later, the trees constantly in front of her moved aside as the forlorn cabin came into view, the roof covered in a thatch of moss.

Nancy frowned as they approached it. "*Why* do you have a spare house in the woods?"

Hopper shrugged as he fished his keys out his pocket. "It used to be my grandfather's. I, uh, mainly use it for storage now."

Hopper pushed on the old door, grunting with the effort as the hinges squeaked into action. The three of them stepped into the interior of the cabin, eyes absorbing the contents, which were all on the verge of dereliction.

Dust and cob-webs varnished the floor, walls and furniture. Clearly

no one had been here in a long time.

Nancy stared at the scene before her with somewhat disgust, while El stared in wonder and fascination.

Hopper glanced down at the transfixed girl and smiled. "How do you like your new home, El?"

"Home?"

"Yeah. You can stay here as long as you want," he assured her. "They won't find you all the way out here."

El suddenly wanted to cry. Not because she was upset, but the exact opposite. She wasn't sure she'd consider this place a *home*, but it was somewhere to stay, somewhere safe, somewhere that now belonged to *her*.

Before she knew what she was doing, she lunged at Hopper. Her arms viced around his middle in a strong hug.

Hopper was taken aback, bewildered by the sudden affection.

"Thank you."

9. Chapter 9

Heyy, everyone...

Plz don't hate me for being the slowest updater ever. And I don't even have an excuse for the delay. But chapter nine is here now so... smile :)

I tried, so I hope you like it. I will now shut up lol

Hopper stared at El's peaceful face as she slept on the run-down bed of the cabin; they'd dusted it down of all the dirt and soil, to make it tolerable enough to sleep in.

She'd passed out the moment her head hit the pillow. Poor kid was probably exhausted – she'd had quite a hectic day, having been on the run from the soldiers *twice* in the last few hours. Nancy was in the process of removing El's sneakers, and gently tucking the blanket around the small girl's shoulders.

The loving scene before him was pulling at mental wounds that hadn't quite healed, so Hopper grudgingly left to wait in the living room.

He sunk – quite literally – into the faded-yellow couch, acknowledging the neater-looking cabin around him, that he'd been in hardly three times in the last decade. Nancy had helped him clean up the decaying mess, and now most of the boxes that were lying around were stored in the cellar. Hopper was just glad the electricity and water still worked.

Three open cans of food sat on the table in front of him, from what they had found in the cupboards, but Nancy's and El's had practically gone untouched.

The tortoise – or 'Yertle' as El called it – was temporarily living in an empty cardboard box. Hopper stared at the animal with somewhat envy. Must be nice to not have any problems, and your biggest worry being when you were next getting fed.

He looked up when Nancy silently drifted back into the living room, arms hugged around her like she was trying to hold herself together.

"Are you staying here?" Hopper asked her, tepidly. Even though he doubted she was going to walk away now, he thought he'd better check; her mom had seemed very worried about her.

Nancy didn't turn to look at him, her hair covering her face, slowly pacing up and down the cabin living room. She didn't reply straight away.

"For the time being, yes," she decided. After a pause, she added, "I think we should get more help too."

Hopper scoffed, "You want to drag others into this?" He knew Nancy was in a bad place right now, but he *had* to make her understand; more people was more danger. They didn't even know where the kid was yet.

"Yes, yes, I do," She still didn't meet his stony expression, staring at anything but him. "We'll have a better chance!"

"You think you know what's best, do you?" *As if he wasn't stressed enough?*

She stopped pacing. "Oh, and you do?" Her voice was laced with cold amusement.

"Yeah, that's usually how it works," Hopper retorted. This was starting to sound like an interrogation. He was supposed to be the one scaring *her*.

"Really?" Nancy knew she was about to lose it, but she couldn't hold it back anymore; she had to know the truth. "Because I would like to know how you managed to get past all those people in Hawkins Lab, to find Will in the upside down. I know Joyce was too concerned about her son to care, but you can't fool *me*! Did they just let you *waltz on by*?"

"Does it matter?" Hopper was suddenly *glad* she wasn't looking at him. "He's safe now."

"It DOES matter!" Her laugh came out more like a sob. "I've been blaming myself this whole time, but maybe it's not my fault."

Hopper rubbed his face, sighing. "Look, kid..."

His abrupt calmness only scared her more. "*Tell me I'm wrong!*" She spun round to face him then, furious eyes glistening.

There was no easy what out of this, Hopper realised, staring at her contorted face. "Kid, you've got to understand-"

"Did you..." Nancy swallowed to stop her voice cracking. "Did you *tell them* where Eleven was?"

Hopper looked away. "It was the only way to make them-"

"DID YOU TELL THEM WHERE ELEVEN WAS?"

"YES!" He roared just as loudly, standing up. "Is that what you want to hear?" He had the height advantage, but her glare was just as enraged as his, if not more.

Nancy's murderous expression suddenly switched to shock and concern, as her eyes caught something over Hopper's shoulder. He turned to look as well.

El stood in the door way, apparently awake now, observing the situation going on in the living room with wide eyes.

Hopper wasn't sure how long she'd been stood there or how much she'd heard, but the obvious hurt on her face said; enough.

"You... You told them?" El's voice shook, as she gradually stepped further into the room. Her eyes stayed trained on Hopper, *always* on Hopper. Hurt and surprise were soon replaced with anger. "*It was you?*"

"El, listen..." Hopper cautioned, raising his hands slightly, as if someone with a gun had just walked in. He probably would have preferred that. "You need to understand-"

She wasn't prepared to listen to reason. "IT WAS YOUR FAULT!" El

screamed, the rage bursting out of her.

Her force sent Hopper backwards and into the wall with a loud crash, shocking everyone, even El herself. Nancy gasped, backing up against the wall behind her, eyes flickering between Hopper and El.

Hopper stumbled away from it, grunting. He looked up to see a flicker of guilt in El's eyes, but that didn't last long; tears streamed down her face, dripping onto her T-shirt.

El took care to keep her telekinesis at bay after that, but she was still fuming. "You're the reason... Mike is gone!" El struggled to express the words, the fury burning through her. It was *his* fault the bad men found them, *his* fault the Demogorgon came, *his* fault Mike- "You... YOU LIE!"

She was in front of him now, pummelling his middle with her fists. "IT'S YOUR FAULT!"

"Woah, kid, hey!" Hopper tried to get a word in over her screaming, grabbing hold of her shoulders. She didn't pay him any attention. Her feeble blows weren't very damaging, but it still hurt. Maybe just not physically. "El, stop it-"

"YOUR FAULT, YOUR FAULT!" she continued almost hysterically, still lashing out like her life depended on it. "YOUR FAULT, YOUR FAULT, YOUR FAULT!"

"Kid, stop it, *stop it!* It's okay," he tried dragging her into a hug, which she retaliated from a few times, adamant on her hitting and hollering. "It's okay, calm down!"

Her chorus of "*your fault!*"s eventually died down and turned into heart-wrenching sobs as she lent against him, the strength gone from her.

Hopper accepted it and held her close, gently rocking her as the kid buried her face in his jacket, shaking as she wept. "You're okay," he muttered, quietly. "I'm sorry, kid." He was glad she'd finally stopped yelling, but all good intentions aside, Hopper knew it *was* his fault.

He looked up to meet Nancy's eyes, silent tears glistening on her *own*

face. Nancy hadn't forgiven Hopper, but there was no point perusing the matter; he'd admitted it now, and El had certainly done a good job making him pay the price. What had been done was done. Now they needed to work on *fixing* it.

Once El had gotten over her crying fit, she refused to look at either Hopper or Nancy, curling up on the couch with Yertle on her lap (she'd suddenly grown quite fond of the tortoise).

The little trust she had gained in adults had rewinded slightly, and she suddenly wished Dustin and Lucas were still with her. *They* had never betrayed her.

"I'm sorry," Hopper voiced, standing near the back of the room, watching El, he realised Nancy deserved an apology too.

Nancy nodded beside him. "I know why you had to do it." At least, that's what she told herself. Even if it *was* a lie, she knew what kind of guilt he was feeling, and having someone else blaming you as well just made it worse.

She'd also accepted he *wasn't* always a man with a plan, and he didn't yet know how to get her brother back. But he'd saved El's life, and that was good enough for her, at least for now.

Hopper glanced at El who was starting to drift off on the couch, and then down at his watch. "If you're definitely staying, why don't you put the kid back to bed? She's more likely to cooperate with you."

Nancy made her way to the other side of the couch and squatted down in front of El, smiling. The young girl looked back at her, warily.

"Hey, you wanna share the bed for tonight?" Nancy asked.

El shifted positions, keeping Yertle steady. "*Share?*" she repeated, perplexed.

"Yeah, it's big enough for both of us," Nancy wasn't familiar with El's limited vocabulary. But her description had given El a vague idea of what 'share' meant.

"O-Okay," El replied, hesitantly. Nancy stood up and held out her hand. El gently placed Yertle back in his box, grabbed her supercom off the table, and took it, pulling herself out of the sinking couch.

Nancy guided El back into the bedroom, leaving Hopper to make himself at home in the living room.

El dropped onto the bed, and Nancy pulled the covers back over her. "Sorry we woke you up earlier," Nancy confessed, pumping up the rather beaten-down pillows. "We got a little loud back there." Technically, El had been the loudest of them all, but Nancy didn't dwell on that.

El didn't reply, simply twisting onto her side and proceeding to watch Nancy take off her own shoes. If they *hadn't* started yelling, she wouldn't have found out Hopper had given away her location. And for better or for worse, she was glad she knew that now.

Nancy crawled into the other side of the bed, lying on her back and looking up at the ceiling. All was quiet for a few minutes, so she assumed El had already fallen asleep.

But then El's quiet voice broke the silence. "I'm... I'm sorry about your friend, Barb."

"It's not your fault," Nancy immediately responded, although the light she was staring at above her began to blur. She *knew* whose fault it was, and it wasn't El's.

El wasn't familiar with protecting people's feelings, or she might have dropped the subject there and then. But she was curious. So instead she asked, "What was she like?"

"Barb?" Nancy sighed, concentrating on the memories. "She's... She was always so kind... and always knew how to cheer me up. We've been best friends since second grade, and I was the unreliable one who constantly let people down.... But not Barb. She was always there for me, you know? When I needed something, she'd help me. Even when I was terrible at returning the favours. I honestly didn't deserve her...." Nancy trailed off; the more she thought about it, the more it hurt.

El listened, with fascination. She couldn't imagine Nancy being a terrible friend; seeing as how kind she had been to her. If El had known how to put this into words, she probably would have said something. But then another thought came to mind.

"Mike said you would be like my sister," she explained, after another moment's silence.

Nancy smiled through her tears. "Really? He said that?"

"Yes."

Nancy already felt some sort of sisterly protection towards the girl lying next to her, so perhaps Mike had been right. If her mind hadn't been so full of concerns for her brother, she probably would have been delighted at the idea of considering El her little sister.

"But then he said he *wasn't* like my brother."

Despite her best efforts, Nancy snorted with laughter. She couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed, and it felt good. Even though El couldn't understand what was funny about it. Nancy *knew* there was more between Mike and El, and this confirmed it, if Mike deffinatly didn't think of El as his sister.

She *also* knew El was just as intent on getting Mike back home as *she* was, if not more. Somehow, they were going to do it.

"Night, El," Nancy whispered, their conversation coming to an end.

"*Night, El,*" Mike stood up to draw the blanket down over the fort.

She smiled up at him. "Night, Mike."

El was glad the older girl couldn't see the tears in her eyes, as she turned to face the opposite direction. "Night, Nancy."

She turned the supercom on, and fell asleep listening to the static.

10. Chapter 10

Hey everyone!

Okay, I'm going to try and update this story more quickly from now on, cuz I've been slow as hell. Sorry about that. So, this chapter ends on a vaguely happy note? Don't worry, there's action and cliffhangers in later chapters, I promise! We're getting there, okay?

Hoping u enjoy Chapter 10 :)

First it was just static. Stuttering in and out of volume.

And darkness, endlessly stretching on. That was it.

Darkness and static.

But then she heard him.

"EL!" his terrified voice called out. His voice!

And then she saw him.

Surrounded by the damp, dark and decaying vines that were the upside down, his wide brown eyes met hers, fear changing to relief. "El?" he gasped softly, and his arms shakily reached out to her.

"Mike!" She bolted towards him without hesitation, heart thumping with joy.

Her fingers briefly touched his coat, before something cracked and shifted; she yanked her hands away like she'd received an electric shock.

It wasn't Mike in front of her anymore, but a clean and spotless suit, which didn't seem to fit in the rotting environment.

El swallowed as the familiar scent hit her. She slowly looked up at the face which the suit belonged to, her skin frozen with fear. His cold eyes stared back into hers.

"Papa?"

El sat up hastily, breathing hard. Looking around, she soon realised she was still in the now-familiar cabin, rays of daylight streaming through the cracks in the curtains.

Her shoulders relaxed slightly; it had just been a dream. A very... *vivid* dream, but still just a dream. Not real, just her brain mixing all her worst fears together.

Nancy sat up next to her – the girl's abrupt motion had woken her as well – hair still tied in a messy pony-tail.

"You okay, El?" she asked, worriedly. Before her eyes focused and widened. "Oh god, El, your nose!"

El automatically reached up to gently touch it. Her fingers came back red.

"Oh," she muttered, using a handful of Dustin's T-shirt she had on, to wipe the rest of the blood away. "That happens sometimes."

Nancy still looked concerned but El didn't say anymore, so the older girl let it go, shifting out of the bed and standing up.

El's focus drifted from Nancy putting her shoes on, to the muffled crackling noise coming from beside her in the bed, which had apparently been ringing throughout the entire night. She picked the supercom up, and the crackling grew louder.

El slowly turned the dial to mute the sound, leaving smudges of blood upon it, and snapped the antenna down.

Her eyebrows furrowed in confusion; she'd heard the static in her dream... she'd seen the *void* in her dream. *But that only happened in the bath*. She'd been bleeding too though. Was it possible what she'd seen had been *real*? It *would* confirm their theories true of Mike being in the upside down. But no... Papa was d-

"El, you coming?" Nancy asked, gently.

El turned to look at her, dropping the supercom back on the bed. "Where?"

Nancy smiled sadly. "Just to the living room. We could find some breakfast?" Even as she said it, Nancy realised she wasn't very hungry despite having hardly anything last night, and El didn't look it either.

Still, the young girl nodded, and slid out of bed, picking up her *own* shoes on the way.

They entered the room to find Hopper snoring on the couch, muttering incoherently. He was pretty good at couch-sleeping nowadays and if that counted as a talent, he certainly had it.

"Hey," Nancy shook his shoulder, until he came around and groggily sat up.

"Everything okay?" he asked with little enthusiasm. As couch-adapted as he was, it wasn't normally *kids* waking him up in the morning.

"Yeah, I was just wondering if you have anything for breakfast," Nancy figured they should eat something anyway.

Hopper stared at her exasperatedly. "Kid, I know as much as you do. Go look!"

Nancy reluctantly did so, peering deep into each cupboard, while El waited anxiously next to Hopper. As she expected, there was next to nothing in there; they'd finished most of it off the night before.

Groaning, she stood back up. "I could always go to the shops and bring some stuff back?" Nancy suggested, coming back into the room. "Since El might be, uh, staying here a while." She wanted to prove herself useful, and not just a burden.

Hopper raised his eyebrows at her, elbows resting on his knees. "Got any money?"

"No," she folded her arms nervously.

He sighed. It didn't take much consideration; he already trusted Nancy. "Alright," he stood up, reaching inside his pocket. "Alright,

take this," he tossed his wallet at her. "You can drive, right?"

"Yeah." His car keys followed his wallet. Nancy pocketed them both, before hesitantly asking, "Should I... bring the others back while I'm out?"

Hopper scoffed. *Was she not letting this go?* "And do what exactly? We're stuck in the middle of the woods, in a tiny cabin, with no plan whatsoever!"

Nancy inhaled through her nose. "I just think we should all be together at a time like this," she returned, quietly.

Hopper didn't exactly have a reply to that. Unlike Nancy, he was a practical person, and having this cramped cabin heaving with people – the majority being *kids* – wasn't his concept of a good idea.

Luckily, he didn't *need* a reply, El's voice piping up instead. "Dustin and Lucas," she insisted firmly, with a hint of excitement. She already missed them. Not as much as- But she still wanted them to be *here*. Their company could always make her feel better. Up to a certain extent.

Nancy looked back at the Chief triumphantly.

Hopper's eyes bore into her but, as usual, had no effect. He groaned, "It's a school day..." he retorted meekly, but already knew his side of the argument had failed. "Oh jeez, okay, fine. *Fine*. Just... be careful. You'll be able to find your way back, right?"

Nancy nodded encouragingly to both statements, before turning back to El. "I'll be back soon, okay?"

El responded by giving the girl a fond hug round the waist. Their common ground of both wanting Mike back aside, El still liked her a lot. Nancy automatically hugged the younger girl back, and Hopper saw a small trace of a smile on her lips. He was glad those two had already formed a bond.

"See you soon," Nancy addressed to them both, before yanking open the old front door, grunting slightly with the effort, and stepping out into the cold morning, closing it behind her with a series of creeks.

As El's wide eyes turned to him, it suddenly dawned on Hopper that by Nancy leaving, he was going to be left *alone* with El. And they hadn't exactly ended things on good terms.

And from the shady expression planted her face, Hopper assumed this was going to be one long hour.

Nancy trekked through the undergrowth for a good six minutes, and finally tracked down Hopper's car, starting up the gears once she was inside.

She considered herself a pretty competent and responsible driver, so she had no issue driving into town to get the boys – and possibly the Byers too. That's if they would come. She was almost certain Lucas and Dustin would at least; they'd be worried about El.

Now zooming through the streets of Hawkins, Nancy wondered where she should visit first. The food store, Big Buy, was in a busy place and it might draw attraction to the fact that she was a teenage girl driving in a police car.

And Dustin? There was a high chance Dustin wasn't even *at* his house, if it was in any condition like she'd seen it in last. And then there was Lucas, who practically lived next door to the Wheelers. If her mom happened to be home and *saw* her, it could cause a whole lot of drama. She couldn't afford to be side-tracked.

Nancy took a deep breath, noting on the fact that her life had been one big risk lately anyway. She spun the steering wheel around in the direction of Maple Street.

She glanced towards her own house hardily. From what she could see, all the curtains were closed. No one inside would be able to see her.

With this in mind, Nancy confidently swerved the car into the Sinclair driveway. She wasn't sure of the time, but figured it was about eight in the morning; the boys wouldn't be in school yet. That's if they were even *going* to school.

Nancy still felt oddly exposed during the short walk up the drive-way and front steps, towards the house.

She reached the front door and timidly knocked, nervously bouncing on her feet, as the door remained shut and silent.

A few seconds later, she heard the door unlocking, and then Mrs Sinclair's smiling face appeared. It immediately turned to surprised shock after seeing who was on her doorstep. Nancy figured she was the last person the woman expected.

Nancy remembered one or two occasions when her mom had sent her next door to bring Mike back home from Lucas' house. That had been a long time ago, and Mike certainly wasn't here now.

"Nancy! How can I help you?" Mrs Sinclair asked, uncertainly, making no move to invite her in.

"I..." It suddenly occurred to Nancy she probably should have planned out a convincing story to tell before arriving. *I was wondering if I could take your son to visit his telekinetic friend, El, who's being hunted and currently hiding out in the woods.* "I... was wondering if Lucas is in?"

Lucas was, in fact, in his room, slouching on his bed and tiredly flicking through a comic that he'd already read a thousand times. He felt pretty fed up that he was sat at home doing nothing, while one – possibly two – of his friends were in trouble. And when he'd reluctantly had to leave Will at the hospital, his friend hadn't looked too good either; the news about Mike had hit him hard. No one seemed to be in good shape. How had things gone downhill so quickly?

At least there was still Dustin, who was on his bedroom floor, toying with a rubix cube he'd found lying around.

Dustin had originally gone back home with his mom, only to find doors kicked down, windows smashed, furniture dilapidated, and bullet holes in the walls.

While his mom had been freaking out about burglars and finance, he'd instantly been afraid that Hopper had been too late, and the Bad Men had successfully taken El back to Hawkins Lab. And as for the Chief... Dustin reckoned he'd either been taken too, or had bailed on her. And the fact that his instincts automatically suspected the latter, worried him a little.

Then to make matters worse, his mom had *then* insisted they go stay with his crazy aunt Denise, who lived on the outskirts of town, while the police investigated their crime-scene house.

To save himself from losing his sanity due to Denise's constant complaining, Dustin had managed to convince his mom to let him stay at Lucas' for the time being. She only swayed when he pointed out Lucas' was a *lot* closer to his school. It also meant he wasn't alone with his thoughts, Lucas knew what he was going through as well.

The two boys had given up talking a while back; here was nothing left to say. Yes, they were worried about El and Mike. No, there was nothing they could do. *No*, nothing fun could distract them from their worries. Yes, they just had to wait. What (and who) they were waiting for exactly was unclear.

The silence was tensioning but comfortable, and it worked for them.

That was until *Nancy* burst in through the door, yelling out Lucas' name. They both turned to look at her in surprise. She sighed with relief upon seeing Dustin was there too.

"*Nancy?*" Lucas exclaimed, his *X-Men; Dark Phoenix* falling off the bed, already forgotten.

Nancy decided to cut straight to the point. "You guys wanna see El?" she asked, leaning off the door frame.

"She's okay?" Dustin gaped, unable to stop himself from grinning. Lucas stood up next to him, wearing a similar expression.

Nancy nodded, laughing at their excitement. "Yes, she's with Hopper. She's safe. And she wants to see you both!"

"Say no more," Dustin promptly retorted, already in the process of

rapidly putting his bag on.

The boys instantly felt less guilty for leaving El, knowing she was officially safe now. And now that she was, they had no reason to leave her solitary again.

They both knew they were staying with her until they found Mike. No matter what it took.

That's what friends are for, right?

11. Chapter 11

Hey everyone! (I really need to stop doing that)

First things first, I. Am. So. Sorry. But before u kill me, I have an excuse for being this late. Some of it's to do with GCSEs coming up, but it's mainly WRITER'S BLOCK! Pretty sure it's not just me who hates that either, amirite? And no, I'm not giving up on this story. I would never do that, we are (or at last I am) definitely seeing this thru to the end!

Here's (at long last) chapter Eleven! (Nope, not eleven. Definitely Eleven with a capital).

Tysm to all those who are still reading. This is for u!

Racing back down the stairs, Lucas wasn't entirely sure what kind of manipulation Nancy was using on his mom, but it seemed to be working exceedingly well. Mrs Sinclair was nodding in agreement, wiping her eyes dry.

Lucas and Dustin watched rather awkwardly from beside the front door, both carrying backpacks stuffed with a bunch of random, useless games and toys they thought El might like (apparently, logical resources like clothes and toothbrushes hadn't occurred to them).

"Thank you so much, Mrs Sinclair," Nancy earnestly replied from whatever conversation they were having, feigning a sweet smile. "This will mean so much to him."

"It's not a problem," she sniffed, putting a comforting hand on the younger girl's shoulder. "Send my love to everyone. This must be an extremely difficult time for you all."

Nancy nodded half-heartedly, staring down at her shoes; putting on an act suddenly wasn't as hard. "I will," she insured, making her way back to the front door.

Mrs Sinclair turned to the boys. "Dustin, I'll let your mom know

where you are, okay?"

"Oh, right... thanks!" he retorted, with absolutely no clue where he was supposed to be.

Lucas suddenly made a mad dash to his kitchen, after apparently forgetting something. "Hold on!" he called over his shoulder.

"What did you say to Mrs S?" Dustin asked, quietly enough for only Nancy to hear, who was now standing beside him and impatiently waiting upon Lucas' return so that they could leave.

Nancy shrugged. "Will's had a hard time. He wants his friends. We're all worried about Mike. You're supposedly sleeping over at the Byers."

The curly-haired boy nodded vaguely in response. *That ought to work.*

Lucas came back into sight a few seconds later with an armful of frozen Eggo boxes. "For El," he explained, when both Dustin and Nancy raised their eyebrows.

"Candy, leftovers, Eggos," Mike ticked them off slowly in his head, before turning to Nancy with a small smile. "She really likes Eggos."

Nancy shivered, the flashback fading as quickly as it had come, and waited for Lucas to finish giving his mom a hug goodbye – which he somehow managed to do without dropping all his supplies.

"Bye, mom!" he yelled, before hurrying out the door somewhat too fast, Dustin following closely behind.

Nancy frowned, closing the door behind her. "Lucas, it's okay, we're going to Big Buy after this, and we can just buy Eggos from-"

"Right, but I'm taking these anyway," he stated, snickering and sharing a look with Dustin.

Nancy couldn't figure out what was so funny; that was until she heard the impetuous scream of a little girl from inside the house.

"MOM! LUCAS TOOK ALL MY EGGOS!"

Hopper sat stiffly on the couch, dragging out his cigarette – he was down to his last two – while he observed the young girl, who had taken to leaning against the peeling wallpaper, with that damn tortoise in her arms.

El didn't look at him or even acknowledge his existence, keeping her eyes focused on her new pet like it was the most interesting thing in the world.

And to her, it probably *was*.

Hopper couldn't figure out if she genuinely had no interest in him, or if she was still holding a grudge against him for... *well*. He didn't El was the kind of person to hold grudges, but then again, how well did he really know her?

"That animal doesn't *do* much, does it?" he commented, deciding one of them needed to break the tensioning silence.

She finally looked up at him, her eyes glazed over in an emotion he couldn't read. It lasted one or two seconds, before her attention was back on her reptile, the silence resuming.

Hopper knew he shouldn't take it personally; the girl seldom spoke to anyone anyway.

In all honesty, El quite liked the fact that Yertle didn't do much. Most of the time, he stayed hidden away in his shell. On the rare occasion he *was* out, his scaly limbs moved slowly and never made any sudden changes; so she trusted him. Back when she'd met him in Dustin's room, it hadn't taken El long to redeem the animal '*safe*'.

But as fond as El was of her new pet, it couldn't fill the void inside of her, that grew larger with each passing hour. Nothing could. Nothing but *him*.

Hopper cleared his throat. "Kid..." he trailed off. Maybe he just needed to cut straight to what was bothering her. "Kid, I'm sorry for telling them where you were, alright? But you gotta understand I had no choice."

She wasn't even looking at him anymore, going as far as shifting

slightly to the left so she was almost facing away from him.

"You might not believe it, but I'm on your side," he reasoned. *Unlike those maniacs in Hawkins Lab.*

El shot him a perplexed stare from the corner of her eye. "On your side?" she repeated, blankly.

Hopper figured that was just her '*Eleven way*' of asking things. "Yeah, it means I'm here to help."

Although El didn't respond after that, he had a feeling he was getting somewhere; her face was skeptical, but he saw a hint of hope and trust in her eyes.

That was because El knew, despite what he'd done, he already *had* helped; he'd given her a '*home*'. She was here because of him. And if he'd helped once before, who's to say he won't do it again? But he'd also betrayed her... and who's to say he won't do *that* again either?

Hopper reckoned he had approximately half an hour with just him and El, before Nancy returned with everyone and he would have a full house (*cabin*). Might as well make use of that time, right?

His eyes caught sight of his old record player stored in the corner of the room, glazed over in dust after being abandoned for God knows how many years. Sure, he and Nancy had cleaned up most things in the cabin, but that was just the essentials. A record player didn't fit into that category.

Hopper decided to act upon the sudden urge to check it out. Hearing him rise from the couch and walk across the room, El looked over her shoulder again, curiosity getting the better of her hostile attitude towards him.

She watched intrigued as Hopper brushed the dust on the surface down to a reasonable amount, studying it thoughtfully.

He then proceeded to sift through the many records until he found what he was looking for. "Hey, you wanna listen to some music, El?" Maybe that would be a better filler for the silence.

She didn't make any indication of yes or no, so he pulled out one of his favourites *You Don't Mess Around with Jim*; *Jim Croce* and positioned it on the record player.

Having never listened to music before, El was more than alarmed when the tune started up. But that didn't last long; the melody was oddly satisfying. Although it baffled her as to exactly *how* the object was making this noise.

Deciding she wanted a closer look, El attentively picked herself up from the floor, gently discarding Yertle on the ground (it wasn't like he could go very far anyway).

She stopped pacing in front of the turn table, eyes absorbed on the spinning disk. She reached out her hand, wondering what would happen if she touched it. But then thought better and retreated it, sticking to simply watching, and listening to the cordial song.

"Pretty cool, right?" Hopper smirked, arms folded.

El hesitated. A flicker of a smile. "Yes," she agreed, quietly. She turned to look at him directly then.

And something passed between them. Maybe it was understanding, maybe it was just acceptance. But either way, El suddenly felt a lot lighter.

Karen Wheeler had been trying her best to act normally throughout the last day or two, more for Holly's sake if anything else. It was as if her physical form was still there, carrying out her usual morning routine, but her mind was elsewhere. Scenarios kept replaying themselves in her thoughts, getting worse as time went by.

Nothing felt ordinary in the slightest; she'd started to feel like there was an unnerving vestige following her around the house. She saw their absence in everything. *That's the couch where Mike likes to sit. That's the chair where Nancy does her homework.* And she hadn't even worked up the courage to go into their bedrooms yet.

Karen had been up all night, partially because she wanted to be

awake in case anything happened, and partially because she just couldn't sleep anyway.

But when Nancy hadn't come home, it had led her to think, what if the same thing that had happened to Michael, had now happened to Nancy as well? Like a curse had been set on her family, intent on pushing her to the breaking point. What if they were both in trouble and needed help, while she was simply at home doing nothing but cooking spaghetti for tonight's dinner? A dinner two people would most likely not be eating. The mere thought made her nauseous.

At least she knew Holly was safe. The young blonde girl seemed unaffected by her siblings' disappearance, bouncing on the couch and laughing at whatever cartoons were on the TV. To be fair, Karen hadn't explained the situation in great detail for her. But what could she possibly say to a three-year-old? It would only cause her unnecessary fear. So maybe it was for the best it stayed that way.

Of course, Ted had been no help whatsoever, having left early for work that morning, most likely to avoid speaking to her. But never mind, she didn't need Ted anyway. What she needed was her children back.

Maybe she just hadn't connected the right dots. Maybe whatever had happened to her kids was staring at her in the face and she just couldn't see it. Maybe it was *obvious*. She tried to rack her brain for anything she had forgotten. The Russian girl that was supposedly living in her basement? But that had just been a theory... right? And surely that couldn't explain the disappearance of *both* of them.

That's when she heard a knock at the door. The wooden spoon fell back into the saucepan with a clang, as Karen rushed to answer it. If she had been thinking clearly, she might have remembered her kids had their own keys and wouldn't need to knock.

Even if it *wasn't* them, maybe it was the police. She had been desperately hoping for news from the police all day as she'd had nothing so far. But she'd been expecting a phone call, not a personal visit to her house. Unless they'd come to tell her-

The teenage boy jumped back in surprise at the abrupt force the door

was opened at.

At first, neither of them really knew what to say, having both been caught off-guard by expecting someone else.

"Oh, hi," he cleared his throat. "Mrs Wheeler?"

She nodded bewilderedly in response.

"I'm Steve," he explained, shifting his backpack nervously. "Is, uh, Nancy home?"

Steve hadn't been too surprised when he didn't see Nancy at school that day. She'd been through a lot, and he wasn't sure he *himself* had quite wrapped his head around what he'd witnessed.

He was glad he'd cut things off with Tommy and Carol at least; he didn't have the patience to be dealing with their stupidity today. The two had been sourly avoiding him throughout first period, which was just fine by him. But Steve realized he *wouldn't* be okay if Nancy also repelled him.

He'd figured out by now, Nancy was different to most girls. It was because of her that Steve was now questioning everything; maybe he wasn't as 'eloquent with the ladies' as he thought. She made him *not* want to be his petty narcissist self, but someone more worthwhile. In fact, it was probably her *aura* which gave him the confidence to go back and take on that monster.

He knew attempting to endure another whole hour of second period was going to be downright impossible, so he decided to just skip it and visit Nancy instead.

He didn't know if she'd be all too keen on seeing his face right now, but he wanted to at least try. Since he wasn't sure what terms he and Nancy were on – or if they were even *friends* at all – he thought it best to be a proper gentleman and use the front door, instead of her bedroom window.

Steve could only assume the woman in front of him with bedraggled brown hair to be Nancy's mother.

"Nancy?" she repeated blankly, as if she'd never heard the name before.

For one fleeting moment, Steve wondered if he'd somehow knocked on the wrong house. But then she spoke again.

"No... she's not," Karen croaked, hearing Nancy's name breaking her solid façade she'd been keeping up all day. "She's not. *They're* not. *I don't know where they are!*"

And then she was sobbing uncontrollably in the startled teenager's arms. There was nothing Steve could think to do except hold onto her.

Brenner couldn't lie, he was relatively surprised at how long it was taking Eleven to return. He'd expected her to deploy whatever heroic plan she'd thought of to save the boy sometime yesterday. And then it never happened, leaving him to wait around for no reason.

He couldn't say this angered him; more time waiting gave him more time to think, to *plan*, but his complete guarantee for his new tactic succeeding had faltered slightly. Of course, there were many possibilities for the delay. Maybe the boy wasn't as important to Eleven as he'd thought. Maybe she hadn't found out yet. Maybe she was just buying her time.

But Brenner wasn't against conceivably speeding up the process, and he'd be lying if he said he hadn't already thought of a way to do that. Maybe it would work. Maybe it wouldn't. Who's to say?

There were many ways to hurt a person, and if he was right, he may have figured out the best way to confront this.

He was a man of manipulation after all.

12. Chapter 12

Hey everyone! (I'm *never* gonna stop doing that)

Guess who's not dead? :D And if u wanted me dead? ...Rude. Anyways, this chapter was originally gonna be longer, but it's been ages so I thought I'd give you guys at least something. I'll try my best to update the next chapter ASAP, which, knowing me, might not be that soon... These take wayyy too long to write -.-

Huge thanks to STRANGER THINGS LEVOES AWARDS (and congrats to everyone else who won too).

Also, thanks so much to everyone who read my little Lumax one-shot, (much appreciation there).

Here we go again, chapter twelve, hoping u guys like it! :)

Nancy pulled Hopper's car up at the Byers' with a nervous twinge in her chest; the house wasn't looking too spectacular with its uneven boarded-up walls, and that was from what she could *see*. She could only imagine what the inside looked like.

"Boys, stay in the car," she shot at the two kids sat in the backseat, before climbing out. They surprisingly didn't protest, and simply nodded in acknowledgement. She slammed the car door, leaving them in strained silence.

Nancy wasn't sure why she felt such a necessity to go here. She'd decided that they had a right to know; they had been involved after all. Did she have the right to intrude though? Throw her problems onto them as well as her own? When no one answered her knock straight away, she immediately thought, *what if they're not back from the hospital yet?*

But it wasn't long before she was greeted with a familiar pair of eyes – which widened when they saw who it was – and a mop of brown hair.

"Nancy, hey," Jonathan smiled warmly, but then he remembered the situation. "I heard about Mike, I'm so s-"

"I have something to tell you," she interrupted quickly, not sure she could deal with anymore pity, even if it *was* Jonathan. "Can I come in?"

Jonathan listened with a solemn expression and his arms folded, while Nancy talked about what she knew, stumbling over her words in a rush, trying her hardest not to concentrate on the burn marks or torn wallpaper littering the house; she was aware of Joyce watching beside the door she'd just come out of – stood behind Jonathan – her eyes growing wide with concern.

But in the end, all it came down to was two things – *Mike is alive, El is safe*. Nancy knew that outcome wasn't enough, not enough for *her* anyway.

She wasn't aware she'd started spiralling. "...and I get it, I'm sorry for just turning up here uninvited, I didn't know-"

Jonathan didn't say anything; he simply stepped forward and pulled her into his arms, silencing her. Nancy automatically hugged him back, slightly startled – suddenly overwhelmed by his scent being so close to her nose – but she didn't try and pull away. Maybe she needed this. Maybe they both did.

Nancy shifted awkwardly as they parted, not meeting his gaze. "I was, uh, wondering if you wanted to come back with me, but I know that... with Will and everything..."

Joyce was decisively speaking up before he could come up with a sustainable answer. "You should go with Nancy," she insisted, stepping forward to put a hand on her son's shoulder, her eyes firm. "Will's gonna be fine with me. Besides, she was there for *you* when..."

"You sure, mom?" Jonathan asked, glancing uncertainly between Joyce and Nancy, but he couldn't contain the sense of glee he suddenly felt.

She nodded, with a smile that almost – *almost* – reached her eyes.

"Nancy?" a questioning voice piped up from behind all of them, breaking the silence. The three of them whipped round to see the newest associate to their conversation. Will snapped Jonathan's headphones off his head, in polite puzzlement. "What are *you* doing here?" He *thought* he'd heard new voices echoing in his small house, so he'd decided to investigate.

"Will, hi," Nancy waved half-heartedly at the fragile-looking boy with dark blue pyjamas, suddenly feeling quite out of place among the Byers.

"Will," Joyce sighed, her voice barely above a whisper as if she thought talking any louder would send the world crashing down, "you should be in *bed*, sweetie..." She attempted to guide him back into his bedroom.

Will paid her no attention, gently prising her hands off his shoulders, gaze fixed on Nancy.

After a few moments of careful consideration as to why Nancy was standing in his living room, his face fell in upmost horror. "Is Mike...?" Will swallowed hard. "Is Mike...?"

"Oh gosh! I..." Nancy rubbed her eyes in exasperation, realising he didn't yet know. "No, Will, no! He's... he's alive."

A weight Will didn't even recognise had been there finally lifted off his chest; his eyes lit up for the first time in... a long time. "*Really?*"

But that's all I know, Nancy coldly reasoned as an afterthought, as she watched Jonathan softly explain to his little brother where he was going.

Will's eyes somehow managed to expand with disbelief even more, as he pieced together the situation. "You've got El?" he gaped at Nancy. He'd heard all about El back at the hospital, and about what'd she done, for him, for everyone. (*And what Mike had done for her*).

"Uh, yeah, back at the cabin," Nancy replied slowly.

Will hurriedly spun round to address his mother, his expression hopeful. "Mom, can I go too?"

Joyce shifted uncomfortably. "Sweetie, you know the doctors said-"

"Yeah, but I can rest over at the cabin, right?" His excitement began to increase.

She inhaled through her teeth. "But you only just got..."

"I know, mom, I'm *sorry*, but I want-... I *need* to see El,"

"Hey, don't be sorry," Joyce persisted, dropping down to his level to make better eye-contact, "I'm just not sure if..."

"I have to at least thank her," Will explained sadly, his voice suddenly quiet, a voice Joyce couldn't possibly say no to. "She's the reason I'm... well, *here*."

Joyce paused, then straightened up again, sighing in defeat. "How about we *all* go?"

"O-Oh," Nancy stammered, "I don't exactly have that much room in the car, Lucas and Dustin-"

"It's fine, I'll bring them both in my own car," Joyce proposed quickly, before her attention returned to her son, "does that sound alright, Will?" He nodded eagerly in response, before racing out of sight to get ready.

"Okay... great," Nancy smiled, assuming Joyce just wanted to stay with Will.

And yes, Joyce *did* want to keep an eye on her son, but that wasn't all. There was also something else, something she found bothered her a lot more than she first realized, something she needed to resolve for her to have peace of mind: and visiting this cabin was the first step.

"MOM!" Will called, exuberantly from back inside his bedroom. "Where is my other shoe?"

Nancy tapped the steering wheel impatiently, her lips pressed together as she waited for the Byers to organise themselves. She thought she'd give them some privacy by waiting in the car with the boys.

"*We'll follow you,*" Joyce had told her, "*You just lead the way.*" So that's exactly what Nancy planned on doing. She knew she had to be careful like Hopper said; she wasn't stupid. No one *else* could follow her, she'd have to make sure of that. No one could find out about El. *Especially* not...

"So," Dustin's voice broke the silent interior of the car. "This cabin..." he leaned forward. "How big is it?"

Nancy rolled her eyes and didn't reply.

"No seriously," Dustin continued, intrigued. "On a scale from Jabba's Palace to Yoda's Hut, how big is-?"

"Oh, they're coming!" Lucas proclaimed, spinning round in his seat to check out the back window, where the three Byers were leaving their house.

She sighed in relief and pulled the car into action.

"So, is it more like a-?"

"Shut it, Dustin."

It wasn't until Steve had guided Karen back inside her house and made her a cup of coffee (he went with the assumption that she wanted milk and sugar) did she finally manage to pull herself together, and explain what had happened, or at least what she knew.

What she said made Steve's blood run cold. Granted, he had taken Nancy back home safely on Saturday, but had no knowledge of what could have happened after. Had the Demogorgon come back? Had Nancy gone out looking for it *alone*? But still, *both* Wheelers?

Steve tried to keep his face one of concerned sympathy (*this is crazy, this is crazy, this is crazy!*) while Karen sobbed out her story, as he sat

patiently next to her.

"I'm sure they're alright, Mrs Wheeler," he finally managed to speak, patting her arm consolingly. "Maybe they just forgot to call...." Geez, what was he *saying*?

"I just want them to be okay," she wailed helplessly, all sense of composure lost, running mascara staining her cheeks. The coffee was forgotten and going cold. "I can't stop worrying about what could have happened!"

Steve nodded slowly. Of course, he was worried too, about

(Nancy)

The Wheeler kids. But there wasn't much he *could* do except stay here and take care of Karen.

Lucky him.

He just always seemed to be the guy that turned up at places at the wrong time.

Lucas winced as his once-red trainer sunk into yet another patch of deep mud he'd mistaken for flat ground. To his left, Dustin appeared to be having similar problems. It must have rained last night, much to their annoyance.

"God dammit, are we there yet?" Dustin complained loudly, concentrating hard on not losing his shoes to the brown sludge with every step.

"You've hardly been walking two minutes, get a grip," Nancy replied, idly. She seemed to be finding this hike a lot easier than them both, as she strided along nimbly, looking back over her shoulder occasionally to check Joyce, Will, and Jonathan were still only a few paces behind.

Dustin frowned at her, but quickly let it go since he was excited to see El. Besides, it was a good job this cabin happened to be so far out from the main town of Hawkins. It made quite a convenient hiding

spot for her.

In fact, it was so well concealed, Dustin would have probably missed it entirely if Nancy hadn't vociferously pointed it out to him.

The two boys observed it closely as they approached it, eyes trailing over the deteriorating rooftop and friable wooden walls with artificial enthusiasm, as they followed Nancy up the creaking steps.

"It's... It's um," Lucas faltered, trying to think of a word that wasn't spiteful – *lousy, wretched, pitiful, pathetic, crap...*

"Homey," Dustin decided on, and Lucas nodded exuberantly in agreement.

Nancy paused at the door, suddenly unsure whether she should knock or walk straight in. Two seconds later, her question was answered for her when someone else yanked the door open from the other side.

The boys caught a quick glance at what was inside, before their vision was invaded by a blur of blue and El was upon them, enveloping them both into a wordless group hug. She felt her shoulders slacken with relief; *finally*, one more thing she could stop worrying about. They were here. *He* wasn't, but at least they were.

"Hey, El," Lucas said after a pause, his voice muffled by her T shirt, "you okay?"

El responded by grabbing their sleeves and pulling them further inside, while Nancy waited for everyone else to catch up.

"It's a... nice place you've got here," Dustin remarked, staring around at the contents of the cabin.

El nodded enthusiastically, missing the sarcasm. She was about to mention '*this is my home now*' but stopped herself, because the words didn't feel quite right. And since she couldn't think of a different way to describe it, she said nothing.

"Hey, why are you wearing my bandana?" Lucas chuckled, poking at El's head. He remembered leaving it back at Dustin's house.

"She looks better in it than you," Dustin commented, while El laughed and swatted Lucas' hands away.

Hopper stood sullenly at the other side of the room, arms folded, silently watching El greet her friends. This was probably something he should stay out of, he reckoned. It's not like he felt a big urge to intervene anyway.

It wasn't long before Will was bustling through the door, followed by the rest of his family. His eyes strayed from his surroundings rather quickly and focused on El instead-

"Your mom... she's coming, Will. Just hold on a little longer."

-She was finally there! In person. Her brown eyes stared back at him with a mixture of bewilderment and uneasiness.

Throughout the entire trek of the forest, Will had been planning what he was going to say to the girl who'd saved his life, but now that he'd finally got here, he was entirely lost for words.

In all fairness, so was El, but that wasn't unheard of.

The awkward pause lasted for a few more seconds, where no one in cabin dared breathe too loudly.

Maybe they're just weren't any words. Before Will knew what he was doing, he'd unhooked his arm from his mom's grip (she'd subconsciously been holding onto him for the whole journey) and ran forward, throwing his arms around El.

El surprised even herself when she didn't even flinch, and instead hugged him back with just as much vigour. She wasn't sure why her face was suddenly wet because she wasn't sad. All she knew was that she'd succeeded; Will was finally safe. She'd wanted him safe. *Mike* had wanted him safe.

She heard a stifled "thanks" from somewhere in her T shirt, and to her, that was more than enough.

13. Chapter 13

Heyy, everyone!

Guess who's back? (Yay?)

So anyway, sorry for the wait. I managed to write out this chapter, but I'm probs gonna be busy for a while - since it's my birthday in a week and then GCSEs in like two weeks, BUT THEN IT'S THE SUMMER, and I'll have loads of time to write :))

Who knows, I might even finish this story before season 3 comes out...

Also, I finally made an instagram fan account! (I'm finn_wolfhard_fiasco if anyone wants to be friends)

Sorry if this sucks but I tried xD really hoping u guys like chapter 13! thanks to all you still reading.

Lucas and Dustin were grinning from ear to ear as they watched their two friends' meeting for the first time, and then couldn't hold back from playfully joining in on the big group hug.

Of course, there was still one member missing among them, and they could all feel the absence – a dark gaping shadow cast over them all, but no one wanted to say anything. Not yet.

It sadly wasn't something unusual; they'd all felt it the week Will had been missing too.

Dustin caught sight of something familiar over El's shoulder and frowned. "Wait, what the hell is *Yertle* doing here?" he enquired, peering into the cardboard box which undoubtedly held his tortoise.

Lucas snorted. "Nice one, El!" he snickered, patting her shoulder.

El looked over, uncertainly, "I-I just... didn't-"

"No, no, it's fine!" Dustin reassured her quickly, gathering up his pet

in his arms. "I just didn't expect to find him... *here*."

"That's probably my fault, kid," Hopper spoke up. *Either that or Hawkins Lab*. "We had to leave pretty fast." He turned to the girl who was still in the process of trying to shut the cranked-up door, and not getting very far. "Nancy, you got the...?" He gestured at her coat pocket.

"R-Right, yeah," Nancy fished out his wallet and car keys, and passed them to him, before hesitating. "Oh... *shoot!* I forgot to stop off at Big Buy."

"Oh, it's okay, honey. I got you covered," Joyce held up the bag she'd brought with her, which she'd hurriedly filled with storing food from back at her house. Joyce had figured this cabin wasn't going to be very well stocked, so she'd come prepared. "Would you put this all away, dear?" She handed the bag over to Nancy, who sank slightly under its weight.

"Yeah, sure," she grunted, proceeding in what she hoped was the right direction.

"I'm pretty sure that shop is closed right now anyway," Jonathan pointed out as an afterthought. "The doors malfunctioned or something."

It was Dustin's turn to snort. "Yeah... *malfunctioned*," he stared hardily at the girl who was hugging her knees on the couch. "I think you mean they got '*Elevened*'".

El frowned in confusion when the boys laughed.

Hopper gave the ajar door one hard shove and managed to close it completely with a stutter of squeaks, shutting out the cold air. "Gotta fix that at some point," he muttered lowly to himself.

It suddenly occurred to him just how long he might be staying here. El clearly wasn't safe in public space – as he'd witnessed first-hand – and he couldn't leave her here *alone*.

There was probably going to be a lot more than creaky doors he'd need to get used to.

"Hopper? Can we, uh, talk?"

He hadn't realized Joyce had been standing directly behind him and spun round to face her. Or more correctly spun round and then looked down, since she was a lot shorter. Most people were in all honesty. "Everything alright?" he asked, worriedly.

"I-I," Joyce knew he was probably addressing the situation with Will. "Yeah... no, it's... it's something else."

"Okay, what?" he pressed, gently.

"Um," Joyce looked tentatively over her shoulder, to where the kids had apparently clustered onto the couch, Lucas and Dustin excitedly advertising El to Will on how awesome she was, whilst Jonathan had followed Nancy over to the kitchen-section – *this really was a small place* – to help her put the supplies away.

Hopper suddenly understood what she was getting at and gestured for Joyce to follow him into the backroom, also known as the only bedroom. She obliged, after a quick glance to check Will was still okay. He was currently laughing heartily at something Lucas was saying, and as much as it made her heart happy, it also made her want to confide this problem with Hopper even more.

After Joyce had shut the door, drowning out the noise and giving them privacy, she was very much unsure about how to start.

Hopper looked intently at her, arms folded, waiting patiently for her to speak.

Instead, Joyce remembered the cigarettes she'd brought with her and grabbed them from her pocket, before holding the packet out towards Hopper. "I'm guessing you need these more than I do," she admitted with a small smile.

Hopper didn't argue, and simply took them with a slight nod of gratification.

Joyce self-consciously wrapped her fleece tighter around herself. "H-How's El?"

Hopper frowned at the question but decided to answer it honestly. "She's.... she's not gonna wait here for much longer."

Joyce nodded sadly and looking down at the floor. "Do you have any kind of plan, or any-?"

"No," he replied, more sharply than he intended.

Joyce exhaled slowly, a little nervous as to how this would turn out. "Okay, well, have you at least told Karen?"

Hopper raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Joyce... you know we can't do that."

She'd known that was going to be his answer. "Yes, but Hopper, you don't understand. She deserves to know the truth."

"Telling her won't fix anything," he retorted, gruffly. As far as he was concerned, Joyce was only procrastinating instead of focusing on what was really important here.

"It doesn't matter, it's the right thing to do."

"She won't believe you," he scoffed, almost amused. "Or it will only make her more worried. Is that what you want?"

"Hopper, you have no idea what it's like," Joyce muttered through gritted teeth.

"What *what's* like, Joyce?" he asked through narrowed eyes, almost challenging her.

"To have a missing kid!" she snapped, not backing down to his glare. "You have *no idea*! And if someone had known what had happened to Will back then..." she paused, squeezing her eyes shut. "I would have wanted them to tell me."

"I *do* know what that's like, Joyce." His voice had gone quiet again.

"No, you don't!" Her laugh came out more like a cry.

"Yes, I do!" he roared in defiance. "*I had a kid!*"

"NO!" Joyce screamed with a rage that lost the last of her composure. "Your kid is *DEAD*, Hopper! *YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND!*"

What followed straight after was a silence louder than a car crash.

Joyce blinked, the meaning of her words slowly absorbing back into her. Unlike Hopper, who had absorbed them the second they'd left her mouth.

He wasn't looking at her anymore, and it was a few moments before he spoke. "Fine." Quiet again.

Joyce swallowed. "What?"

"Go. Go and tell her." His eyes stayed locked solely on the window in the opposite direction.

"Hopper...."

"Just go... Joyce."

Joyce opened her mouth to protest, to say that she was sorry and didn't mean what she said. But she realized it wasn't going to change a thing; the damage had been done.

She sighed in defeat. "...I'll be back soon, okay?"

No answer.

Joyce hesitated for a few seconds, before precipitously turning away from him and pulling open the door. It closed behind her whilst she observed everyone still in the main room. She was partially afraid they'd all overheard and would be looking at her with judgement in their eyes, or even fear.

But she was glad to find out the kids had been making too much noise amongst themselves to be aware of anything else. Or at least the boys were – El had somehow gotten hold of a rubix cube and all her concentration was focused entirely on that. But since she hadn't even figured out how to twist it yet, Joyce doubted she'd be completing it anytime soon.

Nancy and Jonathan were sat leaning against the cupboards at the back of the room together, talking. Or not talking. She couldn't tell.

"Hey, honey?" Joyce gently shook Will's arm to get his attention.

"Yeah?" Will asked, attracting the attention of everyone else on the couch too.

Joyce began to speak, but then paused. Her initial intention had been to take Will with her. But right now, she couldn't see why that was necessary – he seemed happy enough here with his friends.

"I just...." Joyce sighed, and then looked back at him. "Are you going to be okay here?"

Jonathan's head snapped up. "Mom?" he questioned.

Joyce looked unsurely between her two sons. "I... have to leave. To fix something, but I'll be back, okay? I'll be back."

She wondered if they would try to ask why and press the matter further. But neither did, much to her disbelief. Maybe because they knew it was better not to.

Instead, they both nodded firmly, faces serious.

After a slow struggle with the door – in which one or two of the boys had to help with – Joyce was leaving the cabin behind.

She'd make it up to Hopper, Joyce decided, but for now there were more important things to deal with.

Jonathan watched the door slam shut as his mom left. He didn't know where she was going but it didn't matter; he trusted her.

At least she was being productive. What the hell was *he* doing?

Although he was sat right next to Nancy, they hadn't kept up much of a conversation. But he didn't think it awkward. In truth, Jonathan disliked people who always felt the necessity to talk – he was glad that Nancy was also okay with silence. It was just one of the things

he liked about her.

"I think it's pretty cool that you're helping out with El," he decided to mention out of the blue. Despite what you're going through, he added silently.

Nancy nodded. "Yeah, she's a good kid."

The silence resumed, and Jonathan thought she'd done with talking.

"I'm just scared," she confessed, quietly.

Jonathan needed no affirmation on why. "At least you know he's alive," he replied in a flat tone. Wow. He really wasn't good at this.

Nancy looked up in shock. She'd completely forgotten that for a time, everyone thought Will was dead. "I'm so sorry, I wasn't thinki-"

"It's okay. I was in a pretty bad place too, when Will..." he sighed.

But his words got her thinking. Staring hard at the floor, Nancy remembered one of her worse thoughts. The ones she tried to think about as little as possible.

"What if he's *not* alive?"

Jonathan frowned. "El heard-"

"But that was yesterday," her voice cracked. "So much could have happened since then..." She couldn't continue, so she settled for hiding her face in her knees, forsaken images threatening to take over her mind.

Jonathan didn't know how to respond; he wasn't sure he *could* respond. Instead, he hesitantly put his arm around her shoulders. Nancy lent into him, trying to take the comfort that he wanted to give so badly.

"Hey, El, want me to show you how to get one side?" Lucas asked, after tiresomely watching her glare at the rubix cube for ten minutes straight.

"One side?" El repeated, vaguely.

"Here," he took it from her and El watched with fascination as the colours moved in his hands.

Dustin, on the other hand, was in the process of opening Lucas' packet of Eggos, insisting loudly that he "hadn't eaten in four whole hours!" and that was just too many hours.

"Will, you want one?" Dustin asked the boy next to him.

Will smiled and nodded, reaching to take it from him. Of course he wanted one! He'd gone a whole *week* without real food; he wasn't about to turn down Eggos.

Dustin offered El an Eggo too but after she just stared blankly at him for about ten seconds, he slowly retreated it, assuming that was just her way of saying 'I'm not hungry'. He, personally, was an 'I eat when I'm stressed' kind of kid so he took a bite out of it with no shame.

It now occurred to him, as much as Will loved to be back hanging out with his friends like old times (with the exception of newly found El), he wondered if there were better and more effective things they could all be doing. His mom may have gone now, and Hopper still hadn't come back out that room, but Will refused to just leave it to the adults. From what his friends had told him about the week he'd been gone, *they* hadn't been sat around eating Eggos. They'd done everything they could to get him back.

"Hey, El?" Will voiced, chewing slowly.

She turned to look at him with curiosity.

"You know how you found me in the upside down?"

El nodded intently.

"Can't you... can't you find *him* that way too?"

"She had to be in the bath to do that," Lucas explained for her.

"Full of salt," Dustin added, mouth still full of food. "And we can't go

back to the school now. The Bad Men are everywhere!"

Will frowned. "So, what now? Do we just give up?"

"No one's saying that-" Lucas began.

"I saw him."

Lucas dropped the rubix cube – the completed red side landing face up – while Dustin almost choked on his Eggos. All eyes turned to El.

"*You saw him?*" Dustin empathised, dumfounded.

"Geez, El, why didn't you tell us?" Lucas demanded, somewhere between surprise and anger.

"I-I was asleep," she argued, feeling on edge from their abrupt reactions. "I don't... know. I think it was j-just a... just..."

"A dream," Dustin finished quietly.

She nodded sadly, subconsciously clutching the supercomm tighter to herself.

While Dustin and Lucas' sudden hopes seemed to be diminishing again, Will was more skeptical. Or more desperate. Whichever way you chose to look at it.

"What if it wasn't a dream?" he perused, leaning forward. "How do you know it wasn't real, El?"

El stared quizzically at him for a moment, considering it. Before pointing to her nose. "There was red," she noted. "And the s-supercomm was on."

"So maybe you actually saw him!" Will eagerly exclaimed. He'd heard all about El's famous bloody nose and radio powers.

Dustin and Lucas were listening more intensely now, but there was still doubt clouding their vision.

"But, she was asleep..." Lucas muttered.

Dustin raised his eyebrows. "So... do we knock her out or...?"

Lucas kicked him. "Don't be an idiot!"

"She wasn't asleep in the bath," Will was deep in thought now.

"But she's not *in* a bath-!"

"No I mean... maybe she just..." Will bit his lip. "...needs to not be able to see."

All three of them were staring at him in confusion now.

He shrugged exasperatedly. "Isn't it worth a try?" He then looked directly at El. "Don't you want to at least *try*?"

El paused, then nodded vigorously. She looked nervous but there was absolutely nothing jejune about her eyes. She'd try anything. Of course she would.

She reached to tug Lucas' bandana from round her head to over her eyes, with the help of the boys.

"You can't see, right?" Lucas waved his hand in front of her face, pleased to find she didn't react.

"Just remember, El, if nothing happens... don't feel bad," Dustin reassured her dubiously, patting her arm.

She nodded and took a deep breath. But his words were no help. If this didn't work... she'd feel *worse* than bad. Because she would have failed him. That was something she couldn't allow to happen.

"I'll find him," she insisted firmly, turning on the supercomm static. She closed her eyes under the blindfold. "I'll find Mike."

14. Chapter 14

Hey everyone!

Well then... it's certainly been a while haha. I'm not entirely sure if anyone is still reading this (I mean, I hope they are), but I'll be finishing this story at some point either way :D

I know I'm very behind on other people's stories atm (sorry about that) but if anyone wants me to catch up on theirs, plz PM me :) (Srsly plz do cuz I have so many unread emails now it's ridiculous)

Motivation came out of no where, so here you have chapter 14! Hope u guys like it :P

Uhh, does this chapter make sense to you guys? Just checkin cuz I confuse even myself sometimes...

(I'll shut up now)

El could feel someone's hand resting on her arm, Dustin's – maybe Will's – and someone else's knee was leaning against hers. There was the feel of the couch behind her and of course, the musky smell of the cabin.

Then all together, everything washed away in an all-too-familiar sensation.

In a place with no sense of smell, all that remained was the static. The static that was helping to guide El to her destination.

It took her a few seconds to realize the blindfold had also disappeared, for a similar shade of blackness greeted her eyes.

Here she was in the void once again. It had worked!

El spent little time inspecting the ripples of water her shoes were creating beneath her, and instead stared eagerly into the distance of darkness, trying to spot what she had come for.

She saw shapes which appeared to be far off in the stretching obscurity, hardly distinguishable, but then came unnaturally closer with each step she took.

A part of El was terrified. Within seconds, her guessing would be halted, and she would know the truth. Another part of her stood strong. Whatever the truth was, she wouldn't hesitate to find the exact location in reality and bring Mike back home, to *her*. Finally, safe.

She was running now, shoes racing through the water, the sound of splashes echoing for eternity, with no wall to bounce back off.

This was a bleak and hopeless place which El never wanted to enter again. Never forced to, never for Brenner, only when she *wanted* to. When she wanted to save Will, and certainly now, when she wanted to save Mike.

Mike.

She saw him now, his silhouette finally in viewing distance.

El stopped a few paces from him, taking in the sight before her.

Mike was lying on the floor, staring blankly up at the ceiling. He appeared – from what El could see – to be concentrating hard on something. Breathing maybe.

But El was most focused on his face. Tear-tracks were visible, but they seemed faded, as if he had stopped crying a while ago.

And then there were his eyes. Even through the dullness of the void's atmosphere, El could see that the shining light dancing in his eyes she remembered so well had been diminished – still there but not as bright.

"Mike," El croaked, the heartbreak obvious in her voice. It only hurt more to remember he couldn't hear her. He was still all alone, probably scared, probably wondering where she was.

In that moment, El cursed the laws of the void. She wanted him to hear her voice, to feel her arms around him and to never let go again.

Put an end to both their suffering.

El reluctantly shifted her eyes away from him to discover his surroundings, so she would know where to find him.

She was mildly surprised to find it wasn't the upside down after all. But somewhere far, far worse. Her direct focus on Mike had stopped her from seeing what was right in front of her.

No, it couldn't be...

The bed, stainless and unnerving, which had always acted as her place of 'comfort'.

Anywhere but here...

The picture, *her* picture, the one she'd drawn with love and care, back when she didn't know any better.

Please be another dream...

The door, an unwelcoming reminder to the fact she'd always been a prisoner.

And then that door's handle began to turn. El's heart stopped.

It swung forward to reveal who was on the other side. The face presented sent El reeling backwards with a gasp. It was a shock she had expected, but still dreaded, for it confirmed her worst fears.

Her reaction must have triggered her other self, still back in the cabin surrounded by a group of anxious boys, because the void around her was suddenly disappearing. The bed, the door, the picture, the face in front of her, and Mike all crumbled into dust.

El was jolted back to her senses. She ripped the blindfold off in a frenzy, supercom falling from her hands and clattering to the wooden floor, the static sound immediately snapping off.

"E-El, what did you see?" Lucas asked urgently, as El pulled herself out of the tangle of limbs and stood up abruptly from the couch.

For some time she couldn't find her voice, her head was revolving with internal dizziness. She didn't want to believe it.

It took her a while to process the situation. She could only feel paralyzing fear. Fear for her. Fear for Mike. And the repeating question – why was Mike there? *Why was Mike there?*

The boys were quick to be by her side, rather concerned with her violent reaction and lack of response. Dustin and Lucas couldn't help conjuring up another "Barb" scenario and the thought sickened them.

"El? What is it, El?" Dustin was pressing for answers too. "Did you see Mike?"

El's gaze flickered over all their fearful faces, trying to word out an explanation for them. "I-I... Mike's at the I-"

Then it clicked.

Mike was there because of *her*. They were *using* Mike to get to her. It was *her* fault!

The fear melted into benumbing guilt. *Her fault.*

But that soon subsided into a more powerful emotion. The one that often seemed to work for her.

Impulsive anger.

And that anger was aimed solely at one man in particular. The one who was *really* responsible. The man that had caused all the havoc in her life, demolishing her past, present and future. And as if that wasn't enough? Destroying her was one thing. But not Mike. *Not Mike.*

El began promptly strolling towards the cabin door, all other thoughts forgotten.

"Woah, hey El, where you going?" Dustin had darted in front of her to grab her shoulders. He was slightly creeped out by the way her eyes seemed to burn straight through him.

The kids had caused enough disturbance in the tiny cabin for Jonathan and Nancy to start paying attention, leaving their seats against the wall.

"Papa's got him!" El seethed, half-tempted to telekinetically throw Dustin away from her. She needed to leave *right now*. "He's got Mike!"

"What? El, what's wrong?" Nancy prompted worriedly, still confused about El's statement.

"Y-You mean Brenner?" Lucas chimed in, one of the quicker ones to catch on.

El suddenly wasn't the only one who's blood ran cold.

"El, you can't just leave!" Will reasoned, reaching for her arm. No one had a clear head anymore, but they knew better than to let an enraged El run wild in Hawkins Lab. "W-We need to think this through-"

"MIKE NEEDS ME!" El raged, tears finally falling. None of them really understood how important it was that she got him out of there as soon as possible, no one but her. They didn't know what it felt like. "He *needs me*!" The lamp above them swiftly exploded, causing everyone to flinch and snap round in its direction, as the shards of glass smashed to the floor.

"Hey! What the hell is going on?" Hopper demanded, appearing from behind the bedroom door.

"Mike's at Hawkins Lab!" Lucas blurted out. "Brenner's got him – El saw it."

El furiously made another attempt to leave.

"Wait, El, listen!" Dustin refused to let go. "We wanna help you. But-but we need a *plan*, yeah? We don't want anyone to get hurt."

"I don't need-" El began to say, but then stopped. For the first time, she took a moment to examine everyone's faces and realized she wasn't the only one who was hurting.

El had said few words but it was her emotions more than anything which helped them to grasp the dire sincerity of what had happened. Everyone had been fearful that Mike was in the upside down, but now they wished that had been the case.

The boys all looked horror-stricken, and Nancy was already crying.

It wasn't enough to snub the raging fire inside her, but it made El hesitate. She relaxed back on her heels and let out a breath. "A-A plan?"

"Yeah, so we're prepared," Dustin nodded, feeling confident enough to let his hands drop from her shoulders.

Most eyes started turning towards Hopper then, almost on instinct.

The man sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Sometimes he despised being the responsible adult. In truth, he was on the verge of punching a wall after what he'd just heard. And he probably would have if he didn't think this unstable cabin could take it.

He shouldn't be surprised really. Those maniacs had already hurt the lives of many innocent kids. It didn't make it any less infuriating to realize the extremes they would go to just to get Eleven back.

How were they hoping this would end? Would they let the boy go in exchange for El? Or would another fake body soon be found floating down the quarry? Those pesky cliffs. Someone ought to fix them, *they're* the ones to blame for ruining lives.

El's anger made perfect sense. If Hopper had her abilities, he would have blown up the entire cabin by now. Trying to restrain the fury and keep his cool was proving difficult but it was the only way to move forward.

"Okay," Hopper announced, eyeing them all with a new-found seriousness. "Okay, here's what we're gonna do."

Joyce knocked boldly on the door of the Wheeler residence, before waiting anxiously for someone to open it.

Throughout the drive here, she'd been torn about the decision she was about to make. She'd signed *papers*, ensuring she'd never tell a soul about what she'd seen. This was practically breaking the law! What if it backfired? It could wind her – and others – up in all *sorts* of trouble.

But at the same time, she had to do this. It was the 'wrong decision for the right reasons' as they say. And she knew what she was doing was right. Completely right.

As the door was pulled open, Joyce already had her first sentence set on her lips.

"Karen, I-" Joyce was cut short when she saw it wasn't Karen at the door, but instead a teenage boy, whom she knew was *definitely* not one of the Wheeler children. "Oh, sorry, I was just-"

"Uh, are you looking for Mrs Wheeler?" he asked, seemingly unsure about what he was doing.

Joyce probably would have wondered who on earth he was if she didn't have bigger things on her mind.

"Joyce?" Karen appeared behind him. She looked like she'd been recently crying. Understandably so. "Is everything okay?"

Joyce wasn't entirely sure how to answer that. Nothing was okay, but this was certainly a subject she'd have to explain gradually. "Can I... come in?"

"Is it my kids? Do you know where they are?" Karen urged almost hysterically.

Joyce took that as an invite to step through the door, trying to ignore the loitering teenager stood next to her. "It's just... I... w-well yes." She really had no idea where to start.

How *did* you tell someone their son got disintegrated by a monster and now could be dead, or could be in another dimension? Joyce herself was beyond worried, she could only imagine how Karen would react.

Focus, Joyce!

"Listen, Karen," Joyce sucked in a breath, as Karen's panicked eyes stared back at her. "Can we sit down and talk somewhere?" She looked over at the boy warily. "...Alone?"

"W-Wait, hold up," the boy protested, narrowing his eyes. "Joyce? You're Jonathan's mom, right?"

She nodded bewildered.

"I'm Steve! The guy who helped him and Nancy with-" He shot a glance at Karen. "Uh... you know. Sorry about the house by the way."

Joyce vaguely remembered Jonathan mentioning a 'Steve' back at the hospital. "Oh, right-"

"Hey, can someone tell me what's going on?" Karen's voice wavered. "Are my kids okay? Joyce, please, I need to know."

"Nancy's fine," Joyce assured her, causing both Karen and Steve to breathe a sigh of relief.

It was a relief short-lived though, as realization hit.

Karen shook her head in denial, but Joyce continued anyway. "I-I'm afraid I can't say the same for Mike."

15. Chapter 15

Hey, everyone!

That's right. Guess who just updated for the second time in a week. PHIEILLY, THAT'S WHO! For once, I don't have to come at you guys with the "sorry I'm late"

As a side-note I thought I'd mention, for those who haven't caught on, I'm undoubtedly a Britt :P British through and through. so I'm over here trying to write in an American style, but sometimes I'mma slip up xD You may see the odd "colour" instead of "color" or "shops" instead of "store" I'm hoping you guys can just roll with it. Thanks.

On the bright side, we finally get to see the character that everyone's been wanting to hear from :D

On with the chapter! Enjoy, my friends.

"Mommy?" an exasperated Holly ambled into the hallway, a dishevelled barbie doll she'd named 'Jasmine' – which looked like it had lived an eventful life of swimming and makeovers – clutched in her chubby hand. She pulled at her mother's blouse. "Mommy, I can't find Kelly."

'Kelly' happened to be her *other* doll, which had disappeared somewhere in her bedroom.

Karen hardly heard her youngest child's complaint, for she too caught up thinking about her middle one. Joyce hadn't even explained a single thing before Karen was sobbing, hands covering her face, shoulders shaking. She just knew it was bad. Why *else* would Joyce make a house-call to tell her?

Joyce rushed to her side to offer a comforting hand. "Listen, Karen. Why don't- why don't we sit down somewhere?"

Karen regained enough composure to nod. She needed to hear what

Joyce had to say.

"Mommy!" Holly protested, not giving up on her appeal. "Help me look for Kelly?"

Karen sniffed, finally noticing the blonde head several inches below everyone else. "Honey, I can't right now-".

"Why don't *I* help you look, Holly?" Steve offered, deciding he could be helpful somewhere instead of getting in everyone's way.

The young girl's face lit up, apparently content with that idea instead. "Okay!" She lunged forward to grab the teenage boy's hand and tugged him in the direction of her bedroom.

Joyce listened to their fading footsteps as she seated herself opposite Karen at the kitchen table.

"Okay." Karen swallowed and took a breath. "What happened?"

"This is going to be-".

"Why aren't the police here? Surely if something had happened, they'd tell me."

"The police can't-".

"And how do you know *Nancy's* fine? Why hasn't she called? How do you know *anything*-?"

"Karen!" Joyce snapped. "Just calm down."

Karen paused. It only occurred to her that she was afraid to know. Joyce's explanation would break down whatever wall of comfort she'd put up for herself.

For some time, neither woman wanted to break the silence.

"I'm sorry," Karen finally confessed. "I'm just... I'm just..."

"Scared, I know," Joyce nodded sadly, her forced smile dying quickly. "I get it."

"So..." Karen pressed intently. "Do you know where he is?"

"...Maybe," Joyce sighed. *This was it.* "There's this place we call... the upside down."

Far away on the other side of Hawkins, the boy in question had no knowledge of what was happening outside these four walls.

Mike had nothing left to do.

He was trapped. He was alone. He was forgotten. And he was terrified.

Not for himself, but for El. Anxiety was eating away inside of him.

It had been - what? Twenty hours now? Over a day? He had no way of knowing.

No way of knowing if El was dead or alive, caught or free, happy or hurting.

He'd told them where she was.

He doubted anyone in Hawkins Lab was planning on keeping him up to date with the news on her whereabouts.

His fault.

So he had nothing to do but lie here and fret. And it was slowly killing him.

The only thing stopping 'It' from engulfing him entirely was the small flame of hope. He had to have faith that she was still okay.

Of course, it was a flame running out of things to burn, running out of oxygen, but still - it was better than nothing.

And then the unexpected happened.

A click rang out as the door unlocked and opened for the second time during his 'stay' in Room Eleven. Mike flinched; this had not ended

well last time.

The person to enter this time was no nameless, faceless soldier just doing his job.

This time, it was the man himself, in the flesh. And Mike feared that even more.

Aware this could go several ways, Mike wanted nothing more than to run and escape. But that wasn't an option, partly because there was nowhere to escape *to*, and partly because he just didn't have the energy.

Dr Martin Brenner did nothing especially threatening. Instead he sank down onto the bed, clasped hands resting on his lap, staring intently at the young boy.

"Hello, Mike."

His voice alone was repulsive.

From his position on the floor, Mike eyed Brenner with what he hoped was cynical suspicion. Though he had a feeling the scientist could see a lot more in his expression.

Either way, Mike didn't reply. He wasn't willing to take part in another twisted interrogation.

Brenner smiled coldly. "I was hoping we could have a chat."

Get out! Mike wanted to scream. Seconds later, he felt a strong urge to laugh at that statement. Wanting Brenner to 'get out' implied this was *his* room, and no one else was allowed in it.

He kept having to remind himself this *wasn't* his room - *or* El's - and he was in fact just being imprisoned. Because the more he considered this place his room, the more his hope diminished of ever escaping alive.

Then it occurred to him this might be his only chance to find out about El.

Locking down his terrors, Mike pulled himself off the floor with difficulty and instead sat against the wall, directly opposite Brenner.

"Where's El?" he demanded, voice hoarse from lack of use, and realizing he sounded no-where-near fierce.

Brenner let out a sigh void of any emotion. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about," he explained, eyes drifting casually around the room, occasionally glaring hardily at the boy in front of him. "Things didn't go... exactly to plan."

A flicker of a smile appeared on Mike's face. "Sh-She escaped?" For one heavenly moment, all the building anxiety dissolved.

"No, Mike," Brenner replied, voice dangerously low. "She did *not* escape."

Suddenly, Mike felt as cold as the wall behind him. Anxiety knotted back together in the pit of his stomach, now harder than rock.

His voice was no longer cooperating with him. "W-W-Wh-Wha-What-?"

"You see," the scientist continued solemnly, "*we found* Subject Eleven, at the address *you* gave us," he nodded curtly in the direction of Mike, ignoring the horror in the boy's eyes, "but things got slightly... out of control." Brenner stared down at his clasped hands, apparently deep in thought. "Or more specifically... *she* was out of control."

Mike didn't trust himself to speak without breaking, so was forced to compliantly listen to the whole story, heart thudding with vigour.

"Her gifts are dangerous weapons. She was recklessly killing so many of my men," Brenner resolved sorrowfully, before turning to Mike with a hint of ruthlessness in his face. "Because that's what she does, Mike. She *kills* people. She's a killer."

You're wrong! The thought throbbed in his mind strongly. The El he knew was so much more than that. Pure, loving, curious? Yes, but never a *killer*. Mike knew first-hand she'd kill in the act of self-defence or to protect others, but that was it.

"It was somewhat an accident," Brenner admitted. Mike had almost forgotten he wasn't done talking. "I wish I could have prevented it from happening but... what's done is done." He paused, as if reliving the event. "It was almost instinct, someone was just trying to protect those who were still alive, and... they shot down the threat. Shot her dead. She's gone, Mike."

In that moment, Mike wouldn't have noticed if someone was shooting *him*. There was just a numbness. Feeling hadn't set in yet.

"I can assure you, no one is more upset than I am," Brenner confessed wistfully, head bowed. "That girl was everything to me-"

"SHE WAS NOTHING TO YOU!" Something inside Mike snapped cleanly in half and spread a searing anger through his veins, giving him the sudden strength to shove himself away from the wall and stand up on his feet. He was blindly racing towards Brenner, wanting nothing more than to crush the man into dust. "NOTHING! I LOVED HER-"

Brenner's arm forcefully struck the impending attack, sending the boy hurtling backwards.

Two thoughts hit Mike like a ton of bricks in that fleeting second.

The first being the key word he'd just said. For the first time. Out loud.

Until Eleven, Mike had never really understood the concept of the word; *love*. It was some far-off, alienated subject which his twelve-year-old mind couldn't care less about. Even so, he'd always known his parents weren't a very good example.

But after Eleven, everything was crystal clear. He didn't need someone else to explain it to him anymore, for he was now more familiar with its definition than most others would ever be.

And yes, this made his spirits sour with happiness; he was no longer in denial about how he felt about her.

But it was the second thought which sent the prior into a plummet.

Loved.

Past tense.

Mike let out a cut-off cry as he came into abrupt contact with the hard floor.

He wasted no time reclaiming control over his breathing or figuring out which part of him hurt but most, but instead rolled over onto his side before shakily drawing himself to his knees, eyes full of hatred locked on Brenner, who had stood up from his position on the bed, towering over Mike with ease.

"YOU'RE LYING!" Mike screamed, but tears were already leaking off his face, falling pitifully onto the floor below.

Tears of truth – revealing that his heart already agreed, even if his brain hadn't just yet. "*YOU'RE LYING!* Y-YOU'RE-"

"You don't believe me?" Brenner sneered, approaching the boy's forlorn figure. "Then what's this?" He produced a crumpled object from inside his pocket.

Brenner dropped it in front of Mike, who was having a hard time distinguishing the shape in his blurry vision. The colors eventually swam into focus, and he gulped. "D-Dustin's hat-?"

"The hat that fell off him when he ran for his life," Brenner muttered, darkly. "Him and his other friend. They abandoned Eleven. They left her there to *die*, thinking of no one but themselves."

Mike's hand shook as he slowly reached for it. Clutching the soft fabric between his fingers, he realized it was well and truly there.

They wouldn't... His brain wanted to argue, but it wasn't putting up much of a fight. With a sickening dread, he realized he believed it. *They had.*

It was a good job he was already close to the floor, otherwise it would have been a long way down to fall.

Mike hardly noticed Brenner walking away. Without a backwards

glance, the scientist exited through the door, slamming it behind him, leaving the boy in pieces.

Mike noted he was back where he'd started, lying on the floor, staring at the ceiling.

But it was different this time. This time, he couldn't cry; he was beyond such a process. This time, he couldn't move even if he *wanted* to; he had fallen into a soporific paralysis he couldn't wake up from.

Something Mike already knew he'd wanted to hold onto for the rest of his life had been ripped away from him. Something he already knew he couldn't live without. Yet here he was – living without it.

Living without *her*.

The flame of hope stood no chance; it was a sea of water against one flicker of light. It went out. The darkness was succeeding at greedily engulfing his soul and Mike didn't try to fight it. He didn't want to.

In fact, he embraced it. Mike could see no other choice, no reason to retaliate.

'It' had won.

16. Chapter 16

Hey, everyone!

I'm back, with all my delays and confusion! :D How have u all been?

Also, just wanted to say, thank u so much for all ur reviews! I know it's been a while xD but they honestly do make my day, so THANKS!

ALSO also, I finally found one of the stories which gave me inspiration for THIS one: *Selfless* by *StrangerThingsMileven* - some of its aspects are similar to mine :P

Anyway, thanks again for coming here, hope u enjoy chapter 16!

Hopper tried to pay no attention to the prying eyes upon him as he strolled briskly into the Hawkins Police Station.

He knew many of his colleagues would have questions, for him having not made an appearance at work since his abrupt departure yesterday. But he just didn't have the time. He was here for *one* thing, and one thing only. Well... that and a quick phone call.

It was just one thing which would help them undergo a successful mission in Hawkins Lab (successful being nobody dying and them having Mike on the way out). It was just one thing that didn't hold a candle against the wrath of Eleven's powers, yet he still wanted. Just to be safe.

Callahan, who happened to be loitering near the entrance, instantly noticed him when he walked in.

"Chief?" he called, whilst Hopper walked past him without a backwards glance. "Where've you been?" He rushed to catch up and keep up with the other man's pace.

"Been busy," Hopper muttered.

"Something come up?"

"Yeah," he replied vaguely. "Yeah, something came up."

Being in the high authority that he was, this was a thing Hopper could occasionally get away with.

Callahan's enquiries had attracted the attention of the other colleagues in the room who all started talking, ("He's winning, Hopp, we need your help..." "Hey Chief, did you hear about the Henderson break-in?..."), Hopper closed the door to his office, shutting out the voices and letting out a frustrated sigh.

He turned and grabbed the phone sitting on the desk to make his one phone call. It was a good thing he knew where to find her.

Joyce exhaled deeply after finishing off her detailed recalling of the recent events. She'd explained it to the best of her ability (the parts she'd experienced herself considerably harder), from the upside down, to the lab, to the Demogorgon, to Eleven. Now she was looking nervously at Karen, waiting on her reaction.

In fact, a lot was counting on her reaction.

Karen didn't meet her gaze, and had long since averted her eyes towards the table instead, hands clasped tightly in front of her.

After no dramatic reaction came, Joyce awkwardly cleared her throat. "So... do you understand why it's all so confusing? And why we can't involve the police?"

First, there was silence. But when Karen's shoulders started to shake, Joyce's first thought was that she'd started crying again. But she soon realized the woman was laughing. Laughing, like you would to a comedy act.

"You're telling me... the girl that was supposedly living in my basement... w-was real?" Karen asked, not waiting for an answer. "And she was attacked by some... some *mythical monster*?"

"We don't know wh--"

"And my son," Karen continued, clearly a woman who liked to interrupt, "- what? – *sacrificed* himself to save her? And that transported him to another *dimension*?!" Maybe she was sobbing again now. It was hard to tell. "Do you realize-?"

"I-I *know* how crazy it sounds–"

"Is this some kind of a joke to you?" Karen asked. And from the tone of her voice, Joyce knew, that was what she honestly thought: It was all just some insane prank. "Because if it is, you're sick! Did you really expect me to believe all that?"

"Karen..." Joyce felt her side of the argument wilting. A part of her knew this never going to work out; she'd just chosen not to listen to it. "You know I would never lie to you–"

"I thought that too." Karen's words shook between simultaneous laughter and sobs. She wiped her eye, only resulting in worsening the mascara stains. "But you are! You are, and I don't know why! My kids are *missing*, Joyce. Don't you get that? How *dare* you just walk in here and-?"

"I'm telling the truth!" Joyce found herself standing, her abrupt movement sending the chair flailing backwards.

Of course, her words had the exact opposite effect of her intention. Joyce saw the last hint of reason in Karen's eyes snap into livid frustration. "GET THE HELL OUT MY HOUSE! I NEVER WANT TO SEE YOU AGAIN!"

In a second, Karen was also on her feet, her enraged form directly in front of Joyce, screaming at her to get out. Joyce found herself instinctually stepping backwards, purely out of shock.

"YOU THOUGHT I'D BELIEVE Y-YOUR LIES JUST BECAUSE I'M... IN AN EMOTIONAL PLACE RIGHT NOW?"

"No, I..." Joyce was rather distracted by Karen's sheer expression of anger, to form a reply. But she'd never forgive herself if she walked out now without Karen understanding.

"YOU? YOU OF ALL PEOPLE WHO SHOULD UNDERSTAND!"

"Karen-!" Joyce was cut short when the telephone uncaringly interrupted, blaring up right beside her head. For that precise moment, Joyce forgot she happened to be standing inside someone else's house and reached to answer it.

"Hello?" she questioned, before Karen could act in any way.

Karen, naturally, had become very alert whenever the phone rang these past few days, since her children's disappearance. Unfortunately, the only calls she'd received so far had been from concerned friends, wishing her good luck for their safe return.

She had half a mind to angrily snatch the phone away from Joyce, for the call had obviously been for *her*. But she couldn't quite bring herself to do it.

Karen watched with increasing anxiety as Joyce's eyes grew from confused to horror-stricken, the person on her other end of the line apparently still talking, with her still left in an oblivious state of mind. Why hadn't Joyce passed the phone over? Who *was* it? She needed to know!

Several torturous seconds ticked by, before Joyce eventually answered with a croaked "I'll be right there." She shakily hung up, missing the receiver a few times.

"W-Who was it?" Karen's voice had gone deathly quiet. That phone call had clearly brought a sense of tension and urgency; something was horribly wrong. Apparently now worse than it already was.

When Joyce failed to answer in the first few moments – her face frozen in a statue of horrified awe – Karen grew a little more irritated. "Joyce, who the hell *was* it? Was it- was it *them*? Nancy? O- Or Mike?"

Joyce slowly turned to directly look her in the eyes, and Karen saw some hidden emotion which could be interpreted as pity. Karen suddenly realized – this news, whatever it was, was likely to hurt *her* a lot more than Joyce. And whatever Joyce was about to say, it was going to be no lie.

In case it was the sort of news she couldn't come back from, Karen decided to do all her logical thinking right there and then. It couldn't have been the police or some sort of authorities; they would have asked who was speaking, before revealing anything.

Clearly, it was Joyce whom they were hoping to talk with (and not her after all). But why?

Karen reluctantly replayed the conversation she'd just had with Joyce, trying to interpret it from a different – and somewhat scary – angle: the truth.

Assuming that's what it *was*, it meant... oh god, it meant a lot of things. It meant things she could never even imagine truly existed. It meant everything she'd ever known had been a lie. More importantly, it meant Nancy *was* truly safe and okay. Of course, that also meant...

"Have you... found him?" Karen persisted gently, not even considering for a second that it could be a positive thing. Joyce's face plainly read 'nothing good', clear as day.

With a series of metal squeaks, Hopper successfully opened the door to the safe, which lay discretely in the corner of the room. As he'd suspected, the thing he was after was waiting for him inside. Or multiple things, more correctly.

He slung off his empty backpack he brought with him and started shoving them all inside of it. He knew they were all loaded, that was a priority. They'd always been kept here in the Police Department just in case of an emergency. Acting as back-up, if you'd like.

No one would probably even noticed they had gone. This was *his* office after all. And very few individuals had their own key to the safe.

Hopper found it easiest to not think about what he was doing – or even what he was doing it *for* – and instead get on with it as fast as possible, so he could take off quickly, get back on track, be where he was supposed to be.

In fact, everything might have run smoothly if it wasn't for *Flo* walking in on him half-way through, making it rather obvious what his intent was.

Of course, it had to be Flo, the only person who never knocked on his door before entering.

There was a small interval of frozen silence where they both stared at each other.

"Hopper?" she cautioned, dubiously. "What are you doing?"

Joyce's head was ringing, the blunt facts she'd just heard still pounding around, sinking in, making sense. They'd had it all *wrong*! Well, they'd got the first part right; he *had* ended up in the upside down. It would have *all* been right if Hawkins Lab hadn't rudely intervened.

Rudely putting it extremely lightly.

She knew she had to pass on the information, but Karen's overly concerned face was making that very difficult. *Have you found him?* Answer the goddamn question, Joyce!

She nodded.

"Where is he? Is he okay?" And after no response, "Joyce, *please*, where is he?"

Joyce went to speak, but hesitated. Something compelled her to change her choice of words and it came out as "I'll get him back."

"W-What? No, Joyce, I need to know, tell me where-"

"Look, Karen," Joyce retorted, regaining her voice as well as her confidence. "We know where he is, and we'll get him back, alright? But I have to leave, right now." She turned towards the front door.

"No, wait!" Karen choked, desperately grabbing her arm, having wanted her to get out the house a few moments ago, but now wanting nothing more than for her to stay. "You can't just *leave*! Tell

me what's going on!"

"Karen, you... you *can't* come," Joyce explained, trying not to sound harsh and failing.

"What do you mean I can't come?! *He's my s-*!"

"Karen! Please..." Joyce faltered off, unable to describe what she was thinking.

She knew, without a doubt, Karen loved her son – as much as *she* loved Will – but Karen wasn't... like *her*. Karen hadn't been through what *she* had; she hadn't seen what *she'd* seen; she wasn't equipped to deal with the situations Joyce had faced, even if her heart was in the right place.

She could see that even Karen had started to understand that too, accept it, even. She felt her grip loosening on her arm, and Joyce took this as an opportunity to leave. Karen didn't try to stop her.

"Miss Byers?" Steve announced, making his presence known at the foot of the staircase, causing Joyce to stop and turn once again. An anxious Holly was peering around him. Joyce wasn't sure how long he'd been standing there or how much he'd heard but she supposed it didn't really matter. "Can I come?"

"What?"

"Can I come with you?"

Joyce briefly thought it over. Hopper had told her to meet back at the cabin first anyway, and she didn't exactly have time to argue on what his reasons were. "Fine, come on."

Steve needed no further instructions, racing to catch up with her, much to Holly's protest.

"Joyce... wait," Karen's voice had gone soft again.

Joyce let Steve go on ahead outside, turning to look back at Karen one last time.

She now had Holly sat at her hip with one arm, her free hand grabbing a hold of Joyce's wrist. "Will you...?" she swallowed, trying to not let emotion overcome her. "Do you promise you'll get him home safe? Back to me?"

Joyce paused, but then nodded, smiling reassuringly. "I promise."

As she stepped back out into the cool breeze of the day, Joyce thought nothing of it. It would only be much later when she came to regret those words.

17. Chapter 17

Hey, everyone!

To start with, I completely understand that I'm an idiot. It's literally been three months since I posted last, and an entire YEAR since the first chapter xD I mean, I know I like to procrastinate but damn! Sorry about that, guys

Secondly, I'm still just as confusing as ever, BUT this story is deffo making progress :D We're getting somewhere, people

Also, to understand El's part in this chapter, you'll probably need to be familiar with the end of chapter 15...

But anyway, thank you so much for clicking on this! I hope u like chapter 17 (out just in time for Finn's birthday whoop!)

The stretched silence probably went on for longer than necessary because neither one of them wanted to be the first to crack, both caught up in an awkward Try-Not-To-Blink contest. Flor stayed with her arms folded while Hopper stayed holding onto his backpack of weapons.

Of course, it was him who finally gave in to her defiant glare, rubbing his eyes and groaning.

"I... need them for something," he clarified, pathetically. And after Flo still didn't speak, he ended up expanding the story further. It wasn't exactly the whole truth, but – as many would agree – this ordeal had several different versions.

Hopper didn't mention any of the supernatural aspects, or Hawkins lab, or anyone who was involved. He just explained that some dangerous people had taken something that didn't belong to them, and he had to fix it.

"Dangerous?" Flo quoted, finally letting her arms drop. "What kind of dangerous? You can't just leave it at that!"

Need-to-know basis, Hopper reminded himself. "I'm sorry, Flo, that's all I can tell you."

"Then why tell me anything at all?" Her tone wasn't angry, just perplexed.

Hopper paused. "Well... in case I don't come back."

She eyed him carefully. "Is that likely?"

Instead of replying, Hopper slung the backpack over his shoulder and sidled past her, exiting through his office door. She didn't try to stop him, which he wasn't surprised about.

He hadn't replied because he didn't know the answer himself. For maybe the fourth time this past week, he was stepping into this risky unknown he was becoming all too familiar with.

His reoccurring luck was bound to drop one of these days.

"Try not to break anymore lightbulbs, okay El?" Nancy commented, pouring the rest of the broken glass into their makeshift-cardboard bin. "They'll be pretty hard to replace."

El nodded half-heartedly before turning her attention back to feeding Yertle, even though Dustin had gently explained several times that tortoises didn't 'appreciate' Eggos.

It wasn't that El didn't understand him. She just needed to keep herself distracted for as long as possible. The only thing keeping her stationary on this couch right now was Hopper's promise that they "weren't going to leave Mike in there another day". But for some reason, he still wanted to wait until nightfall.

But still, it meant soon. Soon, she'd see him once more; his joyous eyes she'd grown to adore, and his soft smile which she knew was personalized just for her. And soon after, neither of them would have to set foot in Hawkins Lab ever again. She'd make sure of that.

There was something else keeping her agitated too. Although maybe it was a good type of agitation.

Although she was, physically, sat among the boys (who were arguing about whether Lucas' slingshot would actually be effective in any kind of scenario), her mind was somewhere else entirely. Or at least *trying* to be somewhere else. She was trying to think of him. But it was more than just a thought – she could *feel* him. There was definitely something there. And El didn't need any confirmation on who *him* was, because the answer was evident. For her, at least.

The space between them felt vast, intergalactic. Yet also very small. Like he was just an inch away but also forever out of reach. It was a feeling that tore her between relief and torment.

El wasn't sure when exactly this sentiment had started – maybe a few hours ago, if that – and she also wasn't sure *why* it was there. Or what it was. So, since El had the answers to basically nothing, she'd decided to focus only on what she was feeling from it.

It wasn't like she could hear his thoughts or detect the actions he was taking. It was more like she could feel an emotion that didn't belong to her. And right now, it was like an unchanging straight line, and she found comfort in concentrating on it.

Of course, the boys just thought she was being her usual quiet self and didn't question it.

And of course, when that unchanging straight line suddenly dropped dramatically, El certainly felt it. It wasn't a slow fade-away, nor was it a break in her 'connection'. It was still there, but the steadiness had collapsed. Something had gone seriously wrong and she knew it.

It scared her.

No, it terrified her. She couldn't bring herself to ignore it. She had to act upon it. Find a way to stop it, before anything even worse happened. She knew they'd said to wait, but Mike couldn't wait for her any longer.

El wasted no time saying anything to anyone, pushing herself off the couch and racing towards the cabin's exit, accidentally knocking a book out of Will's hands in the process.

She guessed they were calling after her, maybe even following her, but El paid them no attention, hurling open the heavy door five paces before she reached it.

The wind roared against her as she ran through the undergrowth, woodland souring past her. Funny – it felt like *everything* was trying to hold her back.

El wasn't 'seeing' where she was going, because her sight was on her thoughts and her thoughts were on Mike. Pure *intinction* was pulling her in the right direction, the one thing wanting to help her. She'd soon realize it wasn't a good idea to rely on just that.

To her surprise, it wasn't a tree she finally hit. She slammed into something familiar, which stopped her in her tracks.

"E-El? Sweetie, is everything okay?" Joyce asked, kneeling beside her, wondering why on earth the girl had been in such a hurry to get away from the cabin.

A part of El registered that it was Joyce, but she didn't let it distract her. She struggled to get up again, but Joyce held onto her. "Hey- hey El, wait! Where are you going?"

"I need to get to him!" El screamed, very much unable to explain the feeling she had inside her. "It's bad! IT'S BAD! Let me go!"

Steve, stood not far behind them, watched the scene play out in wordless surprise. This... was the first time he'd seen the telekinetic girl called Eleven that everyone talked about. And he had *not* been expecting this as a first impression.

"H-hang on," Joyce stammered, aware that nothing could prevent someone as powerful as El from getting what she wanted. Nevertheless, she refused to let go of the resisting girl. "El- sweetie, listen- LISTEN to me! If you know go now, you could get killed! You can't- hey, look at me! You can't help Mike if you're dead, okay?"

El hesitated for a moment, heart pounding, eyes locked on Joyce, the woman's hands keeping a safe grip on her.

Joyce took this as an opportunity and continued. "We're *going*, El,

alright? I swear. We're going to bring him home."

El swallowed. "Now?"

"...Soon," Joyce answered. El's eyes spoke volumes, and right now they were radiating obvious hurt and betrayal. She probably thought no one else cared as much as she did herself. "Remember? We told you the plan."

"Yes, but he's- he's..." How could she describe this? This sense. There were no words. Words unbeknownst to *man*. Certainly unbeknownst to El.

Joyce didn't give up. "Listen, El, you trust us, right? You trust *me*?"

"I-..." El felt like she did. But maybe she just relied on her instincts a little more; because it was a *part* of her. She wasn't quite sure this 'trust' could fit the same way.

"Because we all have to stick together and rely on each other for this plan to work. Trust is really important. Do you understand, El?"

The girl wavered on a reply but took to saying nothing. At least she wasn't trying to run off anymore. Her expression simply remained blank.

Unsure whether she understood or not, Joyce gently put an arm around her shoulders and steered the girl back in the direction of the cabin, relieved to find that she complied.

Joyce hated making things worse, but she had to admit El had been extremely upset about something. Should she have let her leave after all? When she thought about it, Joyce realized she didn't know if *anything* she'd done today had been the right thing.

"Steve?" Nancy abruptly stood up when the recognizable teen walked in behind Joyce. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to help, of course," he replied exasperatedly.

Nancy looked like she wanted to say more, but then remembered everyone else who was present in that room. And since they were

being the loudest people, all the attention was on them.

Nancy sighed and gestured for Steve to follow her into the smaller room, so they could talk in private. She shut the door on everyone else and that's the last they heard of her for a while.

After that, the concerned boys were quick to approach El as she came back in, but El said nothing to them. There was nothing *to* say. She let the reassuring words of her friends pass straight over her head, just nodding in what she hoped were the right places.

She wasn't trying to be rude or arrogant. She just wasn't quite 'with it'. A part of her was there, sitting on the coach with Joyce by her side and Yertle on her lap, listening to their conversations. A part of her wasn't.

It was a strange experience; her receiving emotion had flatlined while her *real* emotion was alive with stress and worry. To put it candidly, she was perfectly fine. Fine, as in absolutely nothing had changed.

Because it wasn't *her* half that had broken.

When Hopper made his extremely loud entrance back into the cabin – this damn door – he felt a very unnerving vibe. Almost everyone glanced up to acknowledge his presence, but no one said anything. In fact, the cabin was almost completely silent.

Joyce – who was back now – was sat beside El, quietly speaking to her, while the latter stared vacantly ahead at nothing. The rest of them were occupying the floor, playing some kind of two-on-two card game, with Dustin and Lucas against Will and Jonathan. Nancy seemed to have vanished.

When he mentioned this to Joyce, she looked towards the closed door to the bedroom. When Hopper strained his ears, he could hear muffled talking coming from the other side.

"Who's she with?" he asked with little enthusiasm.

"Steve," Joyce replied.

"The Harrington kid?"

"It's... a long story."

Hopper had no interest in hearing it, so he said nothing else. He wasn't going to stray from what was important here.

With this in mind, he glanced down the check the time on his watch. 8.30pm. It was already pitch-black outside. They wouldn't have to wait long now.

A lot of the kids had insisted on knowing why he wanted to wait until it got dark. It wasn't because he thought Hawkins Lab would be emptier; he knew that no high-secrecy-encrypted building like that ever lacked in security. His concerns were more to do with the fact of other people seeing them, normal residents of Hawkins. Of course, the streets were a lot more desolate at night, and he wanted to attract as little attention to their small group as possible. Especially El.

They were going to work through the plan as safely as possible, but at the same time, no matter what, there was no way they were coming out of there empty-handed.

18. Chapter 18

Hey, everyone!

(I'm just gonna skip the apology this time)

It's good to be back! I'm so envious of those writers who can just write and it comes out perfectly almost first time xD

This probably isn't perfect but I hope you will like it all the same :) I'm excited to keep writing this (but I've decided to make no promises on the next chapter's release date)

So anyway, I tend to not swear in my story, but this particular line of dialogue is iconic xD (you'll know it when you see it)

Enjoy chapter 18, guys!

"Alright, listen up," Hopper voiced, the already-low chatter in the cabin dying out. He was suddenly the center attention of all eyes in the room, all of them filled with determination to participate.

Except Lucas, who was busy cleaning up in the bathroom after Yertle had decided to unload on him while he'd been holding the tortoise. Everyone had laughed except himself and El.

"It's almost time," Hopper continued, even though they all knew this anyway, "in terms of who's going..." – he caught a glance of Joyce's firm nod – "will be me, Joyce, and... two of you older kids-"

"I'll go," all three of them chorused decisively.

"You," Hopper pointed at Nancy – that had always been a guarantee – "and you," then Jonathan. Steve looked like he wanted to argue but resolved to saying nothing.

Obviously, there were five spaces in the car, but no one needed to clarify who the last one going was.

Nevertheless, Dustin didn't have quite the same mindset. "What about

us though?" he demanded, shooting a glance back at both his friends.

"You're all staying here," was Hopper's stark reply, his voice so low that none of them dared to argue. "We're only taking El. You know this."

Hopper felt a little uneasy about his reasoning with that. He didn't want to think of the poor girl as their secret weapon, but sadly, that's what she was. Although it wasn't going to be so secret.

Hawkins Lab were prepared for it, they knew it was coming – that *she* was coming; it was the whole goddamn reason they'd taken the boy.

Hopper just hoped whatever tricks they had up their sleeves weren't quite as remarkable as their own.

The box of guns Hopper had set down in the corner earlier were acting as the elephant in the room. Everyone had avoided looking at them or paying them any attention. Until they had to.

"El or not, no one should be left completely unprotected," Hopper explained, dragging the box towards the rest of them. "Keep them out of sight though. It's only for emergencies. Remember, *they* will all have guns too."

Nancy was the first to approach it, choosing one which resembled the gun she'd used to unsuccessfully take out the Demogorgon a few days ago. She ran her fingers over it carefully, wondering if she'd be as comfortable using it on humans as she was on monsters.

"You know how to use it?" Hopper asked.

She nodded, pocketing it in her jeans, hidden by her coat.

Of course, no one suggested that El should take a gun. She seemed particularly insistent on keeping her distance from them anyway.

After Jonathan and Hopper, Joyce seemed hesitant to take one. But after exchanging glances with Hopper, she eventually followed suit.

It wasn't for a whole hour until El heard the words which she'd been

waiting for all night.

"We're leaving now."

Her head snapped up, all other thoughts forgotten. Everyone designated to come with her was heading towards the door and she was quick to stand up and join them.

But she hesitated as the reality crashed down on her, overwhelming her with feelings.

This was happening!

Fear, anger, excitement, joy. More fear. More joy. Her worst nightmare and happiest dream all mixed into one chaotic mess. She was getting Mike back!

Unfortunately, she had to walk through hell to get him. But she'd have to do it. For the sake of Mike, for the sake of everyone. Everyone who was counting on her.

"We all have to stick together and rely on each other. Trust is really important." That's what Joyce had said.

Eleven realized she had to face everything she'd grown to hate in order to save what she'd grown to love. There *were* no shortcuts. She had to do this. She met Nancy's eyes when the older girl turned back to look at her. Her expression read what El was feeling inside.

This was happening.

But El still had enough uncertainty to look back at her friends before following Nancy out the door. The friends that were not coming with her.

"You've got this, El," Lucas reassured her. Dustin and Will nodded vigorously in agreement.

The look splayed on their faces – she would learn later – was undoubtedly trust. They trusted her with all their being to bring back their friend.

She'd never hesitated to help bring Will back, and Will hadn't even been the most important person in her life.

She replied with a small smile, and then turned to walk outside with one reoccurring thought on her conscience: *I've got this.*

The group mainly remained silent on their trek towards the car. And once they were there, still, no one said anything.

During the car ride, El felt queasy. But she decided to blame that on the jarring movements of the vehicle instead of her own thoughts.

We're coming.

Once again, she wished this 'connection' she shared with Mike worked both ways, so she could send hope to the receiving end. It hurt so much that there was nothing she could do.

Her messages were all lost inside her own mind.

Somewhere in the halfway point of their journey, Nancy felt El's small hand slip into her own and hold onto it tight. She turned to look at the younger girl's face, but El didn't meet her gaze, staring straight ahead solemn and expressionless.

It was a nice gesture all the same. A show of support. They were all hurting, and nervous, and angry. But they weren't alone. She gripped it back just as tightly.

Nancy sensed that – despite the obvious – everyone had their own ulterior motives for volunteering in this mission.

Hopper due to his guilt, Joyce and Jonathan due to what had happened to Will, and perhaps El due to justice of herself. She'd been trapped there all her life like a prisoner, her freedom and innocence stolen.

Nancy figured that built-up anger towards the Lab hadn't completely left El yet. Especially not after they added Mike to the equation.

She wondered if anyone in this car would admit to their second

intent, or if any of them even knew it. The subject of Mike had rung so loud in all their ears that maybe they hadn't heard their other reasons yet, or let them in.

Not even she had. Because deep down, Nancy knew she still had anger.

She still partly blamed herself, but Nancy wasn't stupid. She knew the Lab was the cause of Barb's death. They were the ones responsible.

And Nancy also knew that she wouldn't care greatly in whatever El decided to do to that place for revenge. In fact, it would bring her satisfaction.

All this didn't override the fear though, of what they were about to face. That emotion was probably a lot more near the surface at this moment in time.

She found herself reaching for Jonathan's hand with her free one, having been sitting in the middle of the two of them. And when she found it, she kept them both like that, unwilling to let go of either.

They stayed silent but remained intact. They were small in numbers but big in motivation. And this was them. Heading towards the danger.

A mini revolt out to save their own.

The cabin didn't have a clock. There were no small ticks to fill the silence. Instead they settled on listening to the creeks of the wood as the cabin adjusted to the wind outside.

"So, I guess it's just us now," Steve said, oblivious to the silent conversation going on between the three boys.

Dustin stared at the older teen, his face void of its usual enthusiastic and carefree attitude. "No. We're going too," he stated, calmly.

Steve did a double take. "What?"

"We're going too," Dustin repeated, just as seriously. "We're not

leaving El."

Steve was surprised to see them all stand up from the couch, a part of him still thinking they were joking. "To the Hawkins Lab? Are you crazy?"

"We need you to take us," said Lucas.

Now this was something he could argue against. "Oh yeah, how exactly?" Steve inquired, almost challenging them.

"My mom's car!" Will ran to grab the car-keys lying on the window sill which Joyce had left behind, since the others had taken Hopper's car.

"Yeah, no, I don't think so," Steve was positive he was going to win this. There was no way he was driving them anyway! Let alone to a death trap.

"Fine then, we'll walk there ourselves," Dustin declared, emphasizing his point by opening the front door and walking out of it, the other two following.

"Guys, don't be ridiculous! Do you know how dangerous that place is? I'm pretty sure El's got it covered," Steve frantically reasoned.

"You don't know El!" Lucas stepped back through the door to confront him. "But we do. And we're helping her whether you like it or not."

"Yeah, Mike's our friend too," Dustin's voice added from somewhere outside.

Steve frowned. "Seriously, come back. This isn't funny!"

"See you later, Steve," Will waved awkwardly, leaving through the door after his friends.

"Woah, woah, woah! No, you're not taking those!" Put it back," Steve insisted, ripping the weapon from Dustin's hands and tossing it back into the box. Lucas and Will reluctantly did the same with theirs.

They may have talked him into letting them go, but he'd be damned if he was letting three twelve-year-olds carry around loaded guns!

"So, what, we just carry around empty ones?" Dustin complained. "A fat lot of use that'll do."

"A fat lot of use *any* of you will do if you show up and get yourselves killed!"

Will had started rummaging through the box again, after something caught his eye.

"Hey, didn't I just no guns?"

"These ones aren't exactly guns," Will began pulling out the ones near the bottom. They looked almost toy-like like but still realistic enough to feel dangerous. "I recognise them from TV."

Lucas grabbed another one and stared at it closely. "So do I! They're BB guns, aren't they?"

"Why does a police station have BB guns?" Dustin questioned, picking up one himself.

Lucas shrugged. "Don't know. Training?"

Steve sighed. "When I said no guns, I meant *no g-*"

"But these do less damage!" Lucas persisted eagerly, almost shoving the gun in Steve's face to prove his point. "They can take your eye out and smash windows, but they probably can't kill you."

The older teen raised his eyebrows. "I guess that lowers the chance of any of you dying by accidentally shooting yourself." Steve rubbed his face and groaned. "I can't believe I'm doing this."

"Well we are, so let's stop wasting time and get going," Lucas affirmed, while Dustin was contemplating whether to bring Yertle with him or not.

He finally decided to leave his little friend behind at the cabin, so the tortoise would still be here for El when she got back.

"Okay but you've all got to listen to me. No one should be running off on their own," Steve glared at them all. "If any of you little shits die in there, *I'm* getting the blame."

"Roger that," Lucas answered, as the boys enthusiastically sped towards the exit.

And so the second group followed the first.

Hopper's police car sat alone in a narrow, desolated carpark, a short distance away from the Lab for obvious reasons. Their small group filled the interior, waiting for the last shades of lightness to disappear completely.

El stayed with her head turned towards the window in the direction of the Lab, even though it was concealed by a thick layer of trees.

"Is everyone ready?" Hopper asked, his tone monotonic.

After a slight pause where no one replied, he got out the car anyway, everyone quick to do the same. There was a series of doors slamming shut.

They started their second trek in silence. But this time, it was for a matter of urgency to not be heard. It was a slow walk, considering they were entirely in the dark and the ground was very uneven.

A few long minutes later, the trees started to pull apart and reveal what was behind it, until their smallest member caught sight of their destination.

El's breath hitched as Hawkins Lab came clearly into view, splendidly lit up by its many glowing windows. Throughout all her emotions, something took immediate dominance inside of her. It was the feeling of him, his presence, no longer separated by distance.

She felt their connection grow stronger.

19. Chapter 19

Hey, everyone!

It's good to be back after all this time! I'm happy to say this story is still progressing, and I'm grateful for you all who are still reading (One day, we might even reach the end o-o)

In the meantime, I've enjoyed reading many different stories on this site, so if you're a writer, I hope you keep them coming :D

Anyway, here's chapter 19! (Enjoy?... Maybe?)

P.S: the plot of this story was figured out a LONG time ago, and has no correlation to season 3 whatsoever :)

Security guards littered the area, surrounding the entrance. All of them armed, all of them alert. Hopper squinted his eyes at the sight, before gently letting go of the branch he was peering through, as to not cause a rustle.

This small stretch of bracken was currently making quite a convenient hiding place for the five of them to remain behind. They'd stayed there for quite some time, waiting for the right moment.

El stared at the building in mind awe; it felt strange to be viewing Hawkins Lab from the outside after spending her whole life trapped within its walls. But it wasn't her main concern right now.

When Hopper looked towards her, she met his eyes almost at once. He was fairly confident they weren't yet in hearing range, so he spoke quietly but above a whisper.

"Okay, El. You see those guards out front?"

"Yes," she answered, not realizing it had been rhetorical.

"Right. Well we don't want to kill them We just want to knock them out, so we can get inside."

"Knock... them out?" Her face grew confused at this new term.

Hopper hesitated, trying to find a better definition. "Put them to sleep, in a way. Do you think you can do that?"

El swallowed. "I think so." She recounted doing something similar back when she still lived in the lab. While she wasn't entirely comfortable about it, she preferred it to killing or causing pain.

"Wai- Wait!" Hopper grabbed her shoulders before she could work her magic. "They'll be surveillance cameras. You know what those are, right?"

"Yes."

"I need you to break them."

"Won't that alert them that we're here?" Joyce spoke up doubtfully.

"That's a risk we'll have to take," Hopper said. He hoped the technicians would just pass it off for faulty technology.

El looked towards the edge of the building, spotting all four of the black objects. With a tilt of her head, they simultaneously sparked, snapped and broke. In another second, all the guards dropped lifelessly to the ground, their guns falling from her hands.

"Good job, El." Nancy patted her back. There was a slight pause, as their group gazed at the sudden stillness.

"What now?" Jonathan asked.

"Now, we move." Hopper strode forwards without hesitation, the rest of them close at his heel. He stuck to the outskirts of the area, keeping near the wired fence. Less light shone on it, meaning it would attract less attention to them from the bright windows, if anyone inside happened to be looking out of one. There was no wind tonight. Only the sounds of heavy breath and trudging footsteps filled the silence.

It would be a bold move to go through the main entrance, but they had no other choice. There were no available side doors for them to

slip through.

They were almost at the front doorway when Nancy let out a startled yell – as she heard unknown footsteps behind her – but she managed to control herself when she saw who it was.

Hopper spun around to find that their group had suddenly expanded in members. Steve and the three boys stood in front of him, and only the former showed any sign of being nervous.

"What the hell are you all doing here?" he hissed.

"This wasn't my idea!" Steve said, quick to defend himself.

"We have a better chance of succeeding if we have more people," Dustin declared confidently. "It's logic!"

Hopper glanced down at what they were holding. "Jesus Christ, you gave the kids *guns*?"

Lucas began explaining. "Actually, they're BB guns–"

Their argument was interrupted by an alarm from inside the building, as it blared up noisily, causing everyone to flinch. The sharp ringing filled their ears with dread. For the boys, it sounded vaguely like the fire alarm at school, from whenever they had a practice drill. Only this one seemed to be more urgent. More threatening.

It meant they knew. Hawkins Lab knew.

In that instant, no matter if they decided to run inside or run away, everyone knew they shouldn't simply stand there. That was the easiest way to get caught, and ruin everything before it had even begun.

"Come on, we have to go in *now*!" Hopper wasn't going to turn back after everything they'd done. They just had to act fast.

They fled inside the interior of the building, the deafening alarm following them, El taking out the next camera before it could catch them on video, its fate the same as the others.

And then El let the noise of the alarm drain away from her mind, as she was overcome with a feeling. A feeling that was... definitely not nostalgia. The opposite of it, even. She stared at the whitewashed walls. She inhaled the stench of chemicals. She let it all come back. She let herself soak it up; the memories, the lies, the sorrow.

And she allowed it to strengthen her rage.

El felt Nancy grab her wrist and pull her forward – as she'd probably been running a little too slowly – and with that, the harsh reality rushed back into her.

"Come on, this way," Hopper said, guiding everyone to turn right.

No one had an exact idea of where they were going but after some long and confusing conversations with El back at the cabin, Hopper had managed to map out the approximate area that 'Room 011' was located in.

The alarm stopped as quickly as it had started, leaving a violent silence in their presence. Hopper found himself slowing down a little, puzzled by what this meant. Unfortunately, his question was answered seconds later.

"STOP RIGHT THERE!" a voice boomed out, which made Hopper's blood run cold, as he came to a sudden halt.

He knew it would have been a miracle for their whole group to enter and leave the premises without ever being noticed, but he'd at least expected more of a head start than this. Especially from the main man himself. He'd recognized the voice instantly.

Luckily, everyone reacted just as fast as he did. He'd been the first to run into the situation. Everyone else was still safely behind the wall. Their priority was El. To keep her out of sight for as long as possible. She couldn't be seen by the eyes of the lab. Not yet.

He'd already put a system in place, before they'd gotten here. If any of them were caught, the others wouldn't waste time and try to help. They'd run and save themselves.

Which is what they were doing now. With only a flicker of hesitation,

the rest of the group grudgingly left Hopper behind, rushing away from the danger quickly but quietly, before vanishing round the next corner.

Of course, he knew this wasn't ideal. He'd been acting as the ringleader up to this point, and now they were fending for themselves, the mission of rescuing Mike entirely in their hands. He hated to admit this worried him a lot. But he'd been the only one to be seen. He'd have to stay and face the consequences.

Except he wasn't alone. Joyce was standing stoically beside him.

"Joyce-!" he whispered angrily, knowing it wasn't too late for her to run. "Get out of here!" What was she *doing*?! She was leaving her *sons* in possible danger roaming the lab without her, just to get herself caught too!

But her stance didn't change, and she firmly shook her head, leaving Hopper no choice but to accept her decision.

They stood together, as the cluster of guards approached and surrounded them, barking at them to drop their weapons, which they reluctantly did so.

The rest of their pack finally stopped running through the endless white corridors a minute or two later, so they could catch their breath. But even though they were now far away from Hopper and Joyce, Nancy knew they still weren't safe. She could faintly hear angry echoing voices in the distance, coming their way.

What was worse was they seemed to be advancing from all directions. She hadn't expected there to be *this* much security. Maybe she'd just been naïve.

"They can't see El." Nancy looked around helplessly. "W-We gotta hide El!"

Jonathan looked left and caught sight of something noticeable on the wall, a few inches from the floor. "The air vent," he suggested.

Nancy followed his gaze. The vent wasn't big enough for her to fit

through, let alone the other two teens. But she breathed a sigh of relief from seeing it was child sized.

"El? Boys?" She hastily grabbed their attention. "You guys can fit through here. The rest of us can't. You gotta go, take El and find somewhere safe, okay?"

"What?" Lucas exclaimed, the idea of crawling through a vent far from appealing. He promptly corrected himself. "We can't just *leave* you guys!"

"Don't fight me on this!" Nancy snapped, immediately shutting down any growing objections they might've had. She lowered her voice to speak to El. "Can you... open it?"

The younger girl nodded and turned towards it, raising her hand. The screws began to spin around at a high speed, before they dropped off one by one. The vent's cover was quick to follow suit. It loudly clattered to the floor, leaving a seemingly never-ending metal tunnel in their view.

"Okay, go, go," Nancy hurriedly urged all the kids towards it, picking up on the fact that the angry voices had grown alarmingly closer.

El found herself going first and – trying to ignore all her instinctual screaming protests to run away from it – crawled into it. Her hands felt numb on the cold metal, as she remembered the last time she'd done this type of maneuver.

But last time, she'd been trying to get *away* from Hawkins Lab, and she couldn't possibly do that now. She heard jostling behind her as the boys entered in after her, which she took as a hint to keep going.

Once the last kid (Lucas) was in the vent, Nancy bent down to grab the fallen cover – maybe to try and fix it back on – but Jonathan grabbed her hand and shook his head.

"Guys–" Steve tried to warn them, but there was no need because the voices could be heard a second later. They were out of time.

Nancy and Jonathan bolted upright and turned around, trying their best to block the view of the distinctly open vent to the oncoming

soldiers.

The three teens had already raised their guns towards the row of men in front of them. Nancy's heart hammered as she tried to aim her weapon at many different people at once. It was clear they were vastly outnumbered.

The guards knew this too. "Shoot now and you're all dead," one man sneered maliciously.

No one dared to move, locked in a stalemate that the teens knew they'd eventually lose.

A few torturous seconds ticked by, where nothing happened. Until it felt like the corridor started to almost... rumble? Nancy suddenly felt like she couldn't quite keep her balance.

It was gentle at first, hardly noticeable, before the intensity increased. Everyone had caught on by now. Weapons were slowly lowered as this distraction continued. But what followed this was worse. Huge cracks began appearing on the ceiling, which drew all their attention upwards with horror. Nancy's eyes widened as she realized what was about to happen.

To everyone's terrified disbelief, a large piece of the white ceiling began to crumble out of its solid hold, before plunging towards the floor with an almighty crash, landing between the soldiers and the teens.

Panic immediately erupted in everyone, as more and more plaster smashed into the ground around them. The guards screamed and scattered in all directions, trying to flee the scene before they got crushed.

All three teens covered their heads, praying for the collapsing plaster to avoid them.

And by some miracle, the debris never touched them. When Nancy peeked out from under her arm, she saw it was almost like they had an invisible forcefield surrounding them, keeping them from harm's way, whilst the white rubble fell and formed a messy circle around

them. It threw up a cloud of dust as it did so, causing them to cough.

From somewhere deep inside the air vent, El wiped the blood off from under her nose.

"Chief Hopper, Joyce Byers," an unmistakable voice greeted them. Appearing through the blur of faces came the prominent man himself. With hair that was perhaps slightly whiter than Hopper remembered, and an expression that was perhaps slightly more menacing. "Didn't expect to see you back here so soon."

Hopper almost scoffed at this statement. Dr Brenner had inevitably known they'd been coming for a good while now.

The scientist continued anyway. "Don't you remember our agreement? You told us where she was, we gave you the boy, and then we put the past in the past, never to speak of our encounter again."

"Hopper?" Joyce asked, staring at him with puzzlement, as if there weren't a dozen armed men stood in front of them. "What is he talking about?"

"Ah." Brenner's face visibly appeared to light up at this information. "You haven't told her."

Hopper kept his lips pressed together, too furious to speak.

Brenner addressed Joyce with a trace of a smile. "To put it brief, he sold out Eleven's location in exchange for your son. He cast away her freedom like it was nothing, like she wasn't even human." His smile stretched. "What kind of man – ...no, what kind of *sheriff* could do that to an innocent girl?"

"SHUT UP, YOU SON OF A BITCH!" the chief roared. The words left his mouth before he'd even thought them over. Hopper had had enough. He turned to Joyce with some kind of apology ready on his tongue. But then he made eye contact with her, and stopped.

Her eyes showed no sign of sadness or betrayal. It could have been anger he saw, but even if it was, Hopper had a feeling it wasn't aimed

at him.

Joyce turned back to the enemy in front of them. "If you're trying to break me down, it's not going to work," she stated bitterly. "*You're the only monster here!*"

Brenner looked like he wanted to reply, but he was interrupted by a distant crash from down the hall. The doctor turned to speak quietly with one of his associates. Hopper guessed they were contemplating what the noise could have been – and he swore he heard the word 'Eleven' – before the commotion was followed by even more crashes.

Brenner cleared his throat, trying to hide his discomfort. "We're going to find out what the problem is," he announced. Hopper wasn't sure if he was talking to him and Joyce, or his crew.

Brenner glared at his captives. "You two aren't going anywhere. I'll be back to continue this shortly."

Two of his men stayed behind while the rest followed Brenner, because of course he'd want more backup to take on what could potentially be Eleven.

Joyce looked towards the soldiers who were closely watching them, with their weapons poised. She then turned to Hopper. "What do you think that was?" Joyce asked quietly. Hopper didn't need a translation. *What is El doing?*

"I don't know," Hopper muttered back. *She's creating a distraction.*

20. Chapter 20

Hey, everyone!

Although I don't really know who is reading this anymore, cuz literally no-one is reviewing :) I know it takes me like two centuries per chapter to update (for which I am sorry for), but if you're still here and you've read this, plz leave a review at the end, cuz it will mean a lot - I don't care if you only write the letter "m" in the review box, just (in the words of Mike) give me a sign! Then I'll know not to give up :D

Thank you, and on with the story!

Nancy finally worked up the courage to open her eyes after everything was finally silent. This was difficult to do, due to the dust caked around them, and she rubbed it off furiously. It didn't take her long to notice that her whole body was covered in the white soot, created from the fallen debris. Like her, Jonathan and Steve were trying to shake it off them with little success.

"You guys alright?" she asked, and was met with disgruntled replies.

Their guns were still discarded at their feet, but with the threat gone, they collected these back up. There was no sign of any human life so, for a moment she thought the three of them were alone. This relief didn't last long. She could hear an imperceptible groan coming from a few feet away.

"Hello?" Nancy called in the general direction. Her reaction caused the other two to stop moving as well, as they listened for the faint voice. After there was no response, she stumbled over the rubble littering the floor to where she'd heard the noise, Jonathan and Steve following her.

Her eyes eventually focused on a face, which became a whole man. He was half buried underneath the white plaster, unlucky enough to have been knocked unconscious in the collision before he could escape.

Nancy knelt down next to him and shook him. "Hey," she snapped. "Hey!" He groggily opened his eyes to look up at her in confusion, close to passing out again. This didn't put her off. "Do y- Do you worked for Brenner?" Nancy forced the wavering out of her voice. "Well? Do you?!"

His reply was incoherent.

"You know where Mike is, don't you?" Her tone went lower as her anger rose. "Where is he? *Where is my brother?*"

"I-I don't-" the guard stammered, his sentence faltering off.

"What did you do to him?" Nancy demanded. She remembered El's moment of panic earlier that day. How the girl had been hysterical over Mike. How she knew something bad had happened to him. This only added to her fury, and she shook him harder. "WHAT DID YOU DO? ANSWER ME!"

"Nancy, stop."

"WHY WOULD YOU-? WHY WOULD YOU DO THAT?"

"Nancy! Stop!" Jonathan's arms were around her, trying to pull her off the half-conscious man. "It's not helping!"

"NO! HE-... HE-" Nancy looked down through her blurry vision to find the guard had fallen unconscious once again, unresponsive to her shouting. She loosened her grip on his shirt, hands shaking. "He..."

"I know, I know."

Nancy felt herself starting to fall apart. She leaned back on Jonathan and let herself cry. Because she was tired of holding everything in.

Meanwhile, Steve stood silently behind them. He'd started to realize something as he watched the girl he loved sob. As much as he cared about her, he knew he couldn't really help her. Nancy and Jonathan, they lived in a world that he was not a part of, that he didn't belong in. But no, it wasn't jealousy. It was more of an understanding. An understanding which hurt a lot but was still something he could

accept. They didn't need him but there were others who did.

He nervously cleared his throat. "Are you guys, uh, gonna be okay? It's just, I... I could go find the kids and make sure they're safe."

Jonathan looked up and gave him an assured nod. "Yeah, just be careful, alright?"

Steve nodded in return and then left them both behind, not looking back.

The kids were mostly silent as they crawled through the vent. The turmoil of the collapsing ceiling caused by El was long left behind. El, who was leading the pack, became aware that the metal sometimes made clanging noises when she put her weight onto it, but she'd stopped flinching every time it happened now.

Though when she suddenly stopped, the boys grew confused.

"Everything okay?" Dustin called to her, his voice echoing off the metal walls closed in around them. When he glanced round her, he realized the problem. "Oh."

"Which way?" El asked, eyeing the intersection in front of her. Both passages didn't appear to have an end to them.

"I think we need to go East," Lucas offered from the back, vaguely recounting their plan of action back at the cabin. Or at least the equivalent of 'East' after the Gate messed everything around. "That's when Room Eleven is supposed to be. Right, El?"

Her lack of answer suggested he wasn't wrong.

"Does anyone remember which way is East?" the curly-haired boy inquired.

"No, but don't you have a compass?" That was Will.

"Ah right, yes!" There wasn't quite enough room to sit back on his heels, but Dustin still managed to fish the small device out of his pocket from his awkward position. He squinted at it as the arrow

settled. "Okay El, we need to go left."

She didn't move.

"That's um... this way." He gestured to the direction with his arm, hoping El would notice, which she eventually did.

As soon as she began moving again, El knew it was the right choice. The feeling inside her grew just a little brighter. It was still dull – that hadn't changed, but it was there. Gently nudging her in the right direction. Despite everything, she couldn't help smiling slightly. She had almost made it. She was almost with *him*! And nothing was going to stop her from getting there.

"Nancy?" Jonathan gently squeezed her shoulders. "Are you okay?"

Nancy knew what he meant of course. Of all places, this was probably the worst one to break down in. Right in the middle of a dangerous lab, surrounded by broken plaster, on a rescue mission to save her brother. They didn't have time for this.

"Yeah." She sniffed fiercely and swiped at the tears on her face. "Yeah, I'm okay." She accepted his helping hand and they stood up together.

"I think we should stick to our part of the plan," Jonathan said quietly. "I know Hopper and my mom getting caught makes things difficult, but you still have the police radio just in case, right?"

Nancy nodded, aware that Hopper still had the other one. (Only the kids – and Steve – had no means of contacting them, since their arrival had been notably unexpected.) "You're right, we... we still need to try by ourselves."

They silently agreed on the direction and then headed off away from the wreckage, senses on full alert for any guards who could still be lurking around.

Martin Brenner was amused, but not utterly surprised by the destruction that greeted him when he arrived at the scene with his

team. The entirety of the ceiling was obliterated – the edges of it left angrily jagged, and the corridor that lived on the next floor up was on full display.

Of course, this meant many things. Gone were the days where Eleven struggled to crush a Coke can. If she could rip a ceiling down, her limits were greatly improving, and as was her usefulness in his lab. Brenner looked forward to using this to his advantage, his plans and ambitions only expanding.

However, she was also more – how could he put this? – 'feral'. An animal which had broken out of its zoo and learnt to live in the wild, independent of all former protection and control. And with her new-found power, she was able to defend herself a lot better.

But he knew, no matter how dangerous she was, Eleven was still a child; as naïve and as sensitive as they could come, thanks to him. Her strength only manifested physically. Not emotionally. Not mentally. He knew he could use this to his advantage.

Yes, she'd grown attached to some people from the outside, brought them back here with her even. But they were irrelevant. They didn't have to be harmed. Not even the boy. Not if she cooperated. And carried on cooperating for as long as Brenner wished. Because even though she had skills he didn't possess, he had some which she did not. He was the brain and she was the body. That's what made them such a great team.

"Doctor Brenner, he's injured," one of his guards said, interrupting his train of thought. Many of them were crowding around an unconscious man left in the rubble.

"Take him to the infirmary," the scientist ordered them, with little interest. Brenner looked down and kicked half-heartedly at the debris beneath their feet. "If this example is anything to go off, I suggest you approach the subject with caution. But I want Eleven found at all costs."

Between Hopper, Joyce and the two soldiers with their weapons pointed at the former two, the tone around them had taken on a lack

of danger and instead, a sense of boredom. The soldiers clearly weren't going to shoot, and they were all sitting ducks until Brenner decided to return.

Hopper and Joyce continued to eye each other warily – as it's all they *could do* – since they were unsure how this was going to end for them. Hopper could only hope that everyone else was still safe to some extent. That El was keeping them from harm's way. God knows what Brenner would do if–

His thoughts were distracted by the sound of shoes scuffing on the marble floor as someone ran past a nearby corridor. As the figure flashed by, Hopper caught a glimpse of brown hair and knew it was non other than Steve Harrington. By himself. Hopper had no way of knowing if this was good or bad.

The two guards apparently noticed him too, and turned around to follow the noise, their guns faltering from their threatening position.

Hopper took this opportunity without any hesitation. He rammed all his weight into the nearest man, catching him by surprise and knocking him to the ground. His gun fell from his grip and skidded away from him in – luckily – Joyce's direction. She hurriedly grabbed at it.

The second guard was quick to realize what had happened, but not quick enough. As he reeled to defend himself, Hopper was already upon him, shoving him backwards into the wall, causing his head to collide with it, a distinct crack ringing out. He slumped to the floor, already unconscious.

The chief grabbed the unconscious man's gun as the first guard was scrambling back to his feet, and Hopper spun it in his direction. The soldier raised his arms in terror at the sight of both Hopper and Joyce now with their guns aimed at him.

It was easy to see he was rather small-built and skinny. People like him, they relied on a weapon to protect them. Without it, they were powerless and vulnerable. Hopper prided himself on not being one of those men. Especially today.

"Now *tell me*," Hopper snarled at him. "Where is your control room?"

A/N: And where my "m"s at?

21. Chapter 21

Hey, everyone!

Thank you so much for all your "m"s and kind reviews on the last chapter! Wow, I had no idea so many people were still reading this xD Anyway, clearly I didn't give up, as the next chapter is here only ten days later (yeah I have no idea how I managed to do this) - But I wanted to post this, right now, at exactly 1AM because this is precisely the story's two-year anniversary! And like I said about a year ago, I'm seeing this story through to the end x)

So, this chapter is a lot longer than the others, and there's a chance the next one will be a little shorter, cuz y'know... gotta balance out those cliffhangers! But hey, guess who finally makes an appearance in this one?

Alright, please enjoy and review :)) I love u all!

"You won't get away with this!" the guard snarled, as Hopper and Joyce followed him through the lab, their guns still trained on him. "When Doctor Brenner finds you, you'll be sorry."

"Alright shut it, smeghead," Hopper snapped. "Just keep walking. Are we almost there?"

"It's just down the stairs."

A sharp left showed them the stairs, and after reaching the bottom, they entered a small room. A room that was dingy and damp, a failure from the immaculate presentation that the rest of the lab held. No windows, and just one barely working lightbulb. They were surrounded by groaning and churning machines, accompanied by a desktop computer in the middle, currently flashing.

Hopper turned his attention back to their captive. "You. Sit down. Get this damn thing working. I need to see the layout of the building." The solider compliantly sat down, and he eyed the exit. Hopper

caught his gaze. "Try and run, and I'll blow your brains out. Understand?"

The man apparently did so, because he began sweating a little more. He nervously clenched and unclenched his hands for a few seconds, until Hopper grew impatient. "Why don't you just tell *me* how to do it? Whatever gets it done faster."

The guard sighed and began typing in keys. "You can't speak BASIC."

"What?"

"Doesn't matter." The screen flashed on, unveiling a sequence of code. Another click and the floor plan came up in blueprint form.

"We're looking for Room 011," Joyce offered.

The solider marked it out for them. "Here it is, okay? Will you please let me go now?"

Hopper scoffed. "I don't think so. For a start, you need to unlock it."

While he did this, Joyce noticed the room was on the top floor and glanced at Hopper. "Tell them," she said. "They'll be able to get there faster."

"This is pointless," Nancy sighed, as they reached the end of yet another corridor and found a staircase leading both up and down. "The place is way too big, we could be caught at any moment and Mike could literally be anywhere!" It frustrated her that she was so close to her brother yet wasn't able to find him. She hated every moment he had to spend thinking he was alone.

Jonathan sighed. "Look, we know he's in Room 011."

"And we don't know where that is." She softened her voice a little, partly because they were trying to keep a low profile and partly because she knew this wasn't Jonathan's fault. "I've lost track of which floor we're on. And none of these doors even have *numbers*."

"Eleven said hers *did*, remember?" He took a hold of her arms. "We

wouldn't have missed it, don't worry. We've got other people searching for him too. Not all is lost yet."

She smiled sadly up at him. "I'm sorry by the way... for dragging your entire family into this place. After everything you've all been through."

He shook his head. "Don't be. We're all gonna be fine. I know it."

"Nancy!"

They jumped apart as the police radio spurted to life.

"Jonathan! It's Hopper. Pick up!"

Nancy hurriedly freed it from her backpack. "Hopper? Are you okay? How did you escape?"

"Is my mom with you?" Jonathan quickly added.

"It's not important. But yeah, we're both fine," the Chief reassured them. "We have the map to the Lab in front of us. Where are you?"

Nancy glanced at the sign above the stairway. "Uh, third floor, left stairway."

"Alright." There was a slight pause on his end. "You need to go up a floor, follow the corridor to the very end and turn right. Room 011 should be somewhere around there."

Nancy breathed a sign of relief. "Thank you. I-"

The sound of creaking footsteps coming up the stairs made them both freeze. They seemed to be a distance away, but Nancy didn't want to risk her chances. She snapped off the radio and whispered "Let's go! Now!"

"Wait." Jonathan grabbed her wrist. "They're way too close, you need more time. You go and I'll give you a head-start." He gestured at his gun.

Nancy spun round to look at him. "What? No! Are you crazy? We-"

"I'm serious, Nancy, go!"

She froze, one hand on the banister, her stride mid-step, eyes darting between his face and her escape. She knew he was right. She just hated the idea of splitting up in this place. The footsteps from below rang louder in her ears, getting closer to where they were standing. She had to act fast.

In an instant, Nancy flung her arms around his shoulders and kissed him fiercely. It wasn't very long-lasting, nor was it intense. But she had to do it, just in case. Just in case there was never another opportunity. They stared into each other's eyes for a moment, breathing heavily with adrenaline.

"Go!" Jonathan blurted out.

Nancy only hesitated for a split second, before she turned and bolted up the stairs without a backwards glance.

After an uncertain but definitely long amount of time, the kids finally reached the end of the 'passageway'. El nervously glanced through the thin lines of the vent cover, although it was hard to see if the coast was clear or not due to the amount of light shining back at her. She'd have no choice but to open it. She stayed still for a moment, listening for any sound of movement (the boys following suit), wondering if her pounding heart would give her away. But she eventually deemed it safe. As she had done with the previous cover, she concentrated on dropping the screws one by one until it was loose enough, and she could push the cover away with her hand.

El gasped as what felt like much fresher air from what was in that suffocating tunnel soared into her face. The vent cover loudly thudded to the ground and she winced at the noise it made, realizing she probably should have set it down carefully. She peered out at the empty corridor, hardly daring to breathe as she checked that nobody had come running over to investigate the crash. Luckily, no one did and everything except the buzzing lights stayed silent. She began to maneuver herself out of the vent, soon deciding getting out was a lot harder than getting in.

She leaned her palm against the cold floor and shuddered as something rushed through her. Somehow, she could feel... everything through it. This floor was attached to the rest of this Lab, and El was articulated to it all. It was woven in and out of who she was – her home for twelve years. She could feel the memories she had from this place, memories she would never be able to forget. She could feel the hatred and the evil and the hurt. It was so vivid it was almost burning. It made her see red.

"You okay, El?" Dustin asked, concerned when she didn't move for a long time.

His voice snapped her back to the present and she blinked back tears, the memories leaving as quickly as they'd come. *What was she doing?* This building had only ever spread pain. From what they had done to her. From what they were *doing* to Mike. She wasn't quick enough to save *him*, but this time? This time, she would be. Lucas, Dustin, Will. They were her *friends*. And she couldn't let this happen to them too.

"Yes, I..." She scrambled the rest of the way out of the tunnel and shakily got to her feet. "I... I'm sorry."

Dustin moved to follow her out but she roughly pushed him backwards. "Um, El-" He gave her a puzzled look, and watched as she hurriedly picked up the vent cover from the floor and shoved it back over the entrance, entrapping the three boys inside.

Unsure how to fix it properly, she used her powers to partially weld it into the wall, causing the plaster around it to crack. Just enough to know it would hold.

Dustin furiously pushed on it. "El! What the hell?" The other two boys had started frantically questioning her too.

El stared at them through the vent cracks, eyes shining. "I'm sorry, I can't let you come!"

"What?" Lucas protested. "No, we're supposed to stick together!"

El shook her head, tears finally spilling over. "It's me they want." She let her hands fall from the vent. "Not you. You'll be okay. I... I

promise."

She stood up fully and turned away, running. The shouts of "El, come back!" and "Don't do this, El!" thudded in her ears, but she ignored them. She focused solely on the *feeling* – the good one. The feeling pulling her closer and closer to where she needed to be.

It was all that mattered right now. The one who really needed her. She knew she had to run, because she was sick of wasting time. It was probably a good thing that no one crossed by her as she fled through the white halls. Anyone who tried to prevent her might've found themselves wishing they were never born.

I'm coming, she tried again to reach out with little success. But she did it all the same. *I'm coming*.

Follow the corridor to the very end and turn right. Nancy repeated his words again and again in her head as she sped down the corridor. Getting it wrong was not an option. She had not yet managed to figure out the next part of the plan – how to escape. She just knew she had to get to Mike. It's all she could think of.

And turn right and- oh here it is. Okay, and the room should be somewhere around here... Room 011, room 011, room-

Her eyes fixated on it. The door, identical to every other door on this corridor with the exception of its "011". And the fact that her brother was behind it.

She reached it, opened it, stepped through it. She saw him straight away. Lying on the floor. But he didn't react to her coming in. Her first thought was that he must be asleep, but as she moved closer, she saw his eyes were open.

"Hey," Nancy knelt down beside him, and shook his shoulders, trying to keep her voice stable. "Hey, Mike? Mike, it's me. I..." The bruises on his face told her someone had hurt him, but there was nothing to indicate that he couldn't respond. But he didn't even look at her or acknowledge she was there. He stayed vacantly staring straight ahead.

For a horrific second, she thought it was dead. But no... He couldn't be. His eyes had too much life. But life was the wrong word. It was the opposite of life. It scared her.

"Mike..." she tried again. "Mike! It's me. It's Nancy. Please, we need to go!" She looked up and saw the camera staring at her from the corner of the room. There was no El around to break this one. They were watching her, no doubt about that. The faster they both got out of here, the better.

"Mike!" she cried. *What the hell did they do to him?* "Please, we..."

But he couldn't hear her properly. Her voice was distant, faded, like he was listening from underwater. However, he could see her. She was blurry but yes, he could see it was Nancy. His sister.

But it didn't matter. It was just his mind playing tricks on him, trying to give him artificial hope. She was a phantom, a ghost, a figment of his imagination. Or maybe a memory. Whatever she was, it couldn't be real.

The truth was, he didn't know what was real anymore: everything real must have died with El... along with everyone he loved. The only ones who were left were those who wanted to hurt him.

Something was pulling on his coat, dragging him across the room. Had they not done enough already?

"GET OFF ME!" he screamed, writhing out of her grasp. "LEAVE ME ALONE!"

Nancy gasped and sat backwards. "Mike? Mike, it's me!"

He pulled himself away from her, eyes never leaving her, his expression full of resentment. *"What do you want from me?"* he demanded.

"Mike, it's Nancy!" she held her palm up as a gesture of peace. "We've come to get you out of here! Me and El and Joyce and-"

Mike's back hit the metal bed – preventing him from getting any further – and he stopped struggling, breathing heavily.

Suddenly, he was looking at her. *At* her, not through her. "El?" His voice was small, questioning.

Nancy quickly went along with this. "Yes! El, sh-she's here too."

He looked confused. "But... El's dead."

"What? No! No, Mike, she's not." Nancy's blood boiled. She wanted to kill whoever told him that, and she had a pretty good idea of who it was. "She's right here in this building."

Nancy saw what she could only describe as light come back into his eyes. Followed by realization.

"Nancy?"

She let out a choked sob. "Yeah. It's me. Oh God, Mike." She crawled forward and pulled him into a tight hug. When he flinched, she loosened it slightly. "I'm so glad you're okay."

His reply was muffled by her coat and she didn't quite hear it. But it was probably something similar.

"We're getting you of here, okay?" She pulled away and took him by the shoulders. "And we'll find El. Just stay close to me." He nodded and let her help him up. He thought of El having to come back to this awful place. But of course, he knew why she had. And he knew why everyone had let her.

Walking felt strange, as he hadn't done it for several hours. Stumbling slightly, he followed Nancy to the door. The wide-open door. He hadn't seen it like that in so long.

Keeping a firm hold of his arm, Nancy checked round the door and down the corridor. Entirely empty. Satisfied with this, she began running. Unfortunately, she didn't get very far.

"Where do you think you're going?" a man's voice barked. Mike's arm was abruptly jerked from her grasp, followed by screaming.

Nancy spun around in shock. A man with white hair was trying to keep a hold on Mike as he struggled to get away. Despite never

having seen him in person before, she recognized him instantly.

"HEY!" she yelled. No way was anyone going to mess this up for her now. *"Let him go, you bastard!"* She didn't want to use a gun in case she hit Mike, so she had to get resourceful. Running at them, she jumped on Brenner's back and held on for dear life. She knew she wasn't strong, but she just had to distract him long enough to let her brother escape.

Luckily it worked. Brenner's grip on him slipped and Mike managed to stagger away. He witnessed the scene with wide eyes, wishing there was a way he could help.

"RUN, MIKE!" Nancy hollered.

But Mike only froze. Just like last time, in the upside down. The freeze which had cost him his freedom. Which had caused all of this chaos. But this time, it wasn't fear for himself. He couldn't leave her. Not with Brenner. He just couldn't. "Nancy-"

"RUN!"

Run. He had to. Mike forced himself to turn away, to do the right thing. *He'd find help,* he thought as he sprinted down the corridor. He wouldn't leave this building without her.

Now, looking at this out of context, watching a skinny girl cling to a man's back while he angrily flailed around trying to throw her off, might have been laughable. But let it be known, this wasn't going to end well.

Furiously, Brenner managed to grab one of her arms and he roughly pulled her off of him. Nancy fell against the wall to her left and let out a pained groan, sliding down to the floor.

He pulled out his gun at lightning speed, steadily aiming it at her head. "You stupid girl," he sneered. "You should have known better."

"No..." Nancy felt at the wall behind her with her arms, praying for there to be a weapon or an escape. But of course, there was nothing. Tears leaked down her face as she stared into the gaping black hole of the gun's mouth that would surely end her life. "Please don't..."

Bang!